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*New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism:
Explorations of the Urban* by Caroline Rosenthal (review)

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might remind some of Herman Melville's enigmatic white whale in *Moby-Dick*. Yet this spectral force, an embodiment of the exceptional among its species, goes on to rescue a "little golden haired girl" from being lost in a snowstorm (30). A superlative white beast saving an angelic white child in the midst of a mighty white storm borders too much on Manichean allegory (or imagery befitting a Thomas Dixon, Jr. *Clansman*-type spinoff) to be entirely comfortable or original. For all the richness and variety offered by Mexican folk culture, this tale-within-a-tale strikes a rather colorless note coming from the pens of two of the twentieth-century's most gifted writers of color. Despite such minor flaws, this excavated text stands as a memorable addition to the growing (and thus, imperative) diversity of American children's literature today.

—Nancy Kang

Rosenthal, Caroline. *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011.

Cities are hard to define, because they are both imagined communities, based on abstract notions, and material realities. Major cities in North America signify specific things to their inhabitants and observers. There are few comparative studies of major cities in the United States and Canada. Caroline Rosenthal's *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban* engages the major cities of New York and Toronto in order to reveal the ways in which fictional characters negotiate urban life and express their urban experiences. This comparative study has three major goals: to explore how national space is imagined in terms of symbolic landscapes and canon formation in the United States and Canada; to delineate how space may be conceptualized in terms of the urban experience; and to offer literary analyses of contemporary novels that reflect how the cities of New York and Toronto are realistically understood by city dwellers and by outsiders. Rosenthal is particularly interested in the often overlooked feminine gaze and the private spaces of the city that go unnoticed. She emphasizes that her study "aims at closing some of these gaps by looking at urban texts by women writers of diverse ethnicities who react in politically and aesthetically diverse ways to the city in the period after postmodernism," when specific novels characterize the city not as a system of signs but as a confluence of urban experiences that rewrite spatial metanarratives (8).

In her initial chapter, "Imagining National Space: Symbolic Landscapes and National Canons," Rosenthal provides an overview of the national narratives that have influenced the literature of the United States and Canada. She stresses that North American narratives of nation formation are expressed in terms of people's relationship to the land. The question becomes whether one has mastery over the land or if the land has mastery over all. Canadian narratives reflect the theme of survival against a harsh landscape, while US narratives express a manifest destiny and the themes of subduing and conquering the land. City fiction took root during the modernist period as cities grew in the United States. But in Canada city fiction took much longer to flourish, as Canadian literature held to the survivalist motif and preoccupied itself with the small towns in its many provinces.

Rosenthal views New York and Toronto as telling cities that reflect how urban literature is best represented in the two countries. Immigration in/to both transnational cities exposes the flaws, challenges, and contradictions of national narratives more than other major cities in North America. Rosenthal astutely points out that, in literary studies, New York represents the American Dream, while Toronto signifies the multicultural ideals of the nation-state. She regards Toronto fiction as especially important to the development of a Canadian canon that more accurately reflects Canadian spaces as it breaks free from the dominance of British and US literary traditions. Ultimately, for Rosenthal, New York and Toronto novels provide a way for those who were excluded from founding spatial narratives of North America to influence national narratives.

The second chapter of Rosenthal's work, "Articulating Urban Space: Spatial Politics and Difference," initially offers summaries of leading theories of space by thinkers such as Henri Lefèbvre, Michel Foucault, and Edward Soja. Noting the "spatial turn in the humanities and the cultural turn in geography," she turns to how the specificities of urban space are linked to general notions of spatialization and of social practices within the nation (55). Citing urban theorists such as Sharon Zukin, Rob Shields, and Nan Ellin, Rosenthal summarizes different theories of urban space. She ultimately concludes that the "city is a metaphor and synecdoche for the nation, but at the same time it is a place where the specters of the nation, the repressed, the excluded, and the uncanny—the unhomely within the home of the nation—surface" (56). When these specters surface, they reimagine, reproduce, and rewrite the city. Literature that reflects this process also reconceptualizes how national space and national narratives may be understood. Fictions about black diasporic communities are Rosenthal's major examples of this process at work, for they challenge utopic myths of urban centers that stand for the nation. She links diaspora discourse and notions of movement and migration to the modern figure of the *flâneur*, who wanders the city and observes its inhabitants in order to make sense of urban space. This figure's reading of the urban landscape produces a text that offers hidden or alternate views of the public and private spaces of a city. Rosenthal is particularly interested in the ways in which contemporary women writers of urban fiction reimagine the figure of the *flâneur* as "a means of empowerment for groups that are 'Othered' by the dominant discourses of (and gazes on) the city, groups that deviate in terms of race, sex, or sexuality from the mainstream public sphere and contribute their perspective to readings of the diverse lived spaces of the city" (67). The concepts elucidated in the first two chapters inform Rosenthal's close readings of four North American novels.

Rosenthal begins her study with novels set in New York. Chapter 3, "'The Inadequacy of Symbolic Surfaces': Urban Space, Art, and Corporeality in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*," looks at how this novel represents New York City in terms of its arts scene and in terms of how Jewish immigrants and their children negotiate this urban setting. Painting and writing become ways of working out the lived experience of New York City. Viewing works of art as "countersites that often reveal what is otherwise unseen in the self or in urban space" (85), Rosenthal spends much time discussing the symbolic images within a painting that functions as an intertext, commenting on life in the city and on what remains hidden in the lives of its inhabitants. For example, the female body in a portrait evokes the eroticism of the city, while an image of a taxi signifies literal transport and a figurative longing for connections between seemingly always moving bodies in the city. Paintings

reflect remembrance and absence/loss of bodies even after the characters' relocation to New York. References to real places, such as the Chrysler Building, the Twin Towers, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Statue of Liberty, function as concrete abstractions that signify shadow meanings for the characters. Both the city and the city's "illnesses" (such as anorexia) inspire art. Like bodies, both the city and art themselves become sensationalized and commodified. The result is an inability among characters on their own to see beyond the surface of art, sights/sites, and bodies. All of these images reveal a city that is a home but also a potentially dangerous place where repressed desires that have little outlet might explode into violence to the self and to others if a sense of community does not take root. Rosenthal views Hustvedt's *What I Loved* as a text that encourages a "mixing of identities" that "is vital in order to unravel the unseen and hidden in the self and to incorporate the Other" (117). She concludes that the novel shows the limits of the American Dream and is a critique of the United States as a Promised Land, especially if there is a lack of empathy holding communities together.

Rosenthal's fourth chapter, "Rewriting the Melting Pot: Paule Marshall's Brownstone City in *The Fisher King*," analyzes Marshall's novel in terms of competing ethnicities occupying brownstones in New York City. The novel critiques the melting pot theory as applied to a black community in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Central Brooklyn. Rosenthal views the novel as "Marshall's artistic attempt to value cultural difference while finally overcoming the rifts in the community" (127). She points out how Marshall effectively uses the Grail myth to characterize, through the eyes of a black child, a group of brownstones as medieval castles with opposing knights occupying different sides of the street: Bajans on one side; African Americans on the other. The child's grandmothers live in these markedly different abodes, in spite of the same occupation as maids. The Bajan brownstone and its occupant appear run-down. Yet its owner views herself as successful because of ownership of the home, though its rooms have been rented out. The African American owner views herself as superior because she succeeds as a trickster who dupes the city officials into naming her property as a tourist site. Both she and her home are in impeccable condition, due to the revenue from tourism. Rosenthal rightly emphasizes that the two competing narratives within the story revolve around issues of visibility, recognition, and claims of ownership of male spaces within the neighborhood. She reads the inclusion of a character in the Parisian jazz scene as a way for Marshall to create a diasporic space in which the characters may find common ground against oppressive forces, such as racism and classism. She emphasizes the importance of jazz in the novel as a way of linking people via a distinctly urban American music form that connects people across time and space. The remembrance of the lost jazz musician in the novel finally allows members of the community to bridge their differences. Rosenthal concludes that the novel dismantles master narratives of the American Dream and the Promised Land and shows how improvisational movements, as with jazz, are necessary for survival of the urban experience.

The next two chapters focus on the city of Toronto. Chapter 5 "Specular Images: Sub/Urban Spaces and 'Echoes of Art' in Carol Shields's *Unless*" looks at how Shields's novel comments on the literary market of Canada as being too focused on the small town instead of acknowledging the presence of the metropolis in Canadian literature. Rosenthal views the mother-daughter conflict in the novel as a metaphor for the conflict over whether to favor the small town or the multicultural mega city. The daughter's protest in the heart

of downtown Toronto of a public suicide by a Muslim woman results in a narrative about how a once small British city that reflected Canadian goodness and charity at its best became a metropolis that is still learning how to interface humanely with its large immigrant population and marginal cultures. The mother's adherence to small town life and her failure to recognize her daughter's desire to know the new Toronto complicates the former's writing, as she cannot represent Toronto realistically in her own novel. Her limited viewpoint "eclipses the complexity of urban multiculturalism in Canada" (209). References to real places like Bathurst, Bloor, *Honest Ed's*, and the Annex function as markers in a spatial narrative of the city that is often absent from the national narrative. In Rosenthal's view, while the mother's domestic space in her small town residence is valued for its own nuances, the dichotomies between mother's and daughter's viewpoints vis-à-vis their spatial narratives indicate the need for Canadian literature to strike a balance of such fictions, depicting multiple national spaces and multiple national voices.

Chapter 6 "'The End of Traceable Beginnings': Poetics of Urban Longing and Belonging in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*" identifies Brand's novel as a critique of Toronto as Canada's ideal multicultural city. The novel characterizes the lives of a group of young people whose parents are immigrants. Their parents' histories inform their own, as each one seeks to express their private longings in relationship to the nation. Failure to recognize these longings leads to violence. Throughout the novel the characters' emotional geography is linked to their traversing of the streets of the city. Their engagement with Toronto and its suburbs expose hidden areas occupied by marginalized and unrecognized groups who animate these in-between spaces with creative energy. Rosenthal stresses that the narratives of the characters and the descriptions of their roots and routes through Toronto reflect a city that is not settled but in a process of constant creation vis-à-vis "strategies of unmapping Toronto" (257). Graffiti is part of this process, as it marks possession of areas of the urban landscape that have been re-inscribed. The installation art of one of the female characters also functions as a means of expressing the longings of inhabitants of different parts of Toronto. In a city where dark bodies are either invisible or hyper-visible, city dwellers, from Africadians to West Indians, must resist stereotypes based on origins and claim turf as part of their urban experience. Race and class, particularly in terms of black housing developments, are very much implicated in how the city is read. Yet, for the group of young people in the novel, the city provides freedom to escape their parents' expectations in ways that their parents cannot escape the burden of the past. Rosenthal concludes that "Brand's four protagonists form a community that is not based on a common history but that thrives on empathy, an empathy that transcends the many differences that divide them" (258).

Reviewing the major elements in the novels she discussed, Rosenthal ends her study with chapter 7 "Synthesis." She highlights the fact that the four texts discussed contribute to new understandings of New York and Toronto that are not necessarily found in national narratives and national canons. She notes that these novels challenge the ways urban fiction may be read by calling attention to the physical, emotional, and psychological effects the urban experience has on the body; to the unique nuances of domestic spaces; to observances of normally invisible or unheard groups, such as immigrants and lesbians; and to spaces unrecognized on the maps of urban terrain. These novels also link urban space to the global realm. Finally, Rosenthal sees in the four texts "a significant new branch

of contemporary urban fiction, because they make the city come alive beyond linguistic labyrinths and below the superlatives of architecture by investigating how people actually live and exist in the complex environment of a metropolis" (277).

Caroline Rosenthal's *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban* is a thorough study of specific urban fiction. Not only does it achieve its goals, but it also offers original readings of contemporary texts that reflect realistically the lived experience of people in the metropolises of New York and Toronto. Though the second chapter may be challenging to those unfamiliar with spatial theory, the text is readable and engaging for the most part. Literary scholars interested in urban fiction and comparative literature, cultural geographers, and those involved in transnational cultural studies will find this book appealing. The first of its kind, Rosenthal's study should influence North American studies and studies of urban fiction, in particular, for some time to come.

—Deonne N. Minto

Manganelli, Kimberly Snyder. *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race: The Tragic Mulatta and the Tragic Muse*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2012.

In her accessible and original book, Kimberly Snyder Manganelli examines the circulation of two key figures in nineteenth-century culture and literature, the Tragic Mulatta and the Tragic Muse, by following their evolution over the course of the nineteenth century. The book's novelty arises from its insistence that these "two crucial literary types" should be compared across national boundaries, and should be understood as complimentary cultural archetypes (6). On both counts she succeeds, though her discussions about the life-choices possible for these figures reveal much of the text's power. Victorianists will mark Manganelli's transnational methodology, and literary scholars may enjoy her parallel analysis of African American and Jewish characters. Feminist and women's studies scholars will note her attention to the sexual politics of erotic commodification linked to the commercial circulation of these genre types. The general reader will follow how "mixed-race" female protagonists won social mobility and confronted male exploitation as they maneuvered the auction block, the public stage, and the home.

Manganelli's introduction provides a general context for her themes. She notes the transnational cult of true womanhood in the nineteenth century, and how the figures of the Tragic Muse and Tragic Mulatta intersected and diverged from it. Relying on scholars such as Shawn Michelle Smith, Manganelli asserts that these two types upset codes of ideal womanhood, an idea structured around white women, by creating a "crisis of visibility in the public sphere" (9). Many narratives revolved around the vulnerability of mixed-race women to male predation. For the enslaved Tragic Mulatta, this danger was particularly acute, and often reduced her choices to sexual submission or death. The Tragic Muse, on the other hand, functioned somewhat differently. Her artistic prowess and magnetic sexuality often allowed her other options. *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race* emphasizes how both types of heroines attempted "to resist the conventional narratives" (16).