

Aliki Varvogli, Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction.

Despoina Feleki



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10830>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Despoina Feleki, « Aliki Varvogli, Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2015-2, document 2, Online since 28 April 2015, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10830>

This text was automatically generated on 22 April 2019.

Creative Commons License

Aliko Varvogli, Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction.

Despoina Feleki

1

Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction by Aliko Varvogli is the latest addition in the Routledge “Transnational Perspectives on American Literature” series. The writer’s ambitions to trace latest writing trends in American letters and update concerns about narratives of immigration in a post-Nelson Mandela era are expressed from the onset. Within the context of travel narratives and theories of dislocation, the book manages to show how the idea of the *American* in American letters has evolved according to latest political, economic, and technological determinants after World War II as this is traced in early twenty-first century fictions. More importantly, it investigates revisions of the American Dream that question America as both a destination and a point of departure in a globalized and technologically-informed world.

2

The essays in the study investigate different aspects of travel and dislocation expressed in early twenty-first-century novels in order to demonstrate the role travel, media, and politics play in the construction of culture, citizenship, and identity in the present fast-moving world. They also manage to bring into light questions about the importance of ethnicity as this is defined in present America and in the Western world. As Varvogli explores the relation between a personal and a national identity, she highlights the dynamic processes involved. For these reasons, she chooses novels that “go outward” (xv), and study what it means to be an American citizen in the twenty-first century – and often in the aftermath of 9/11 – when imaginary and real borders have been questioned. Most importantly, she raises questions about the Americanness of these American novels and the limitations of the American gaze of their writers.

3

In Part I, “Africa and the Limits of Fiction,” the first four political novels are written by white American writers who are concerned about the aftermath of slavery and how it affects transcontinental politics and human consciousness. The essays in Part I study the literariness of the novels, the combination of different genres, such as reportage and historical fiction, and the divide between fact with fiction in order to show how contemporary fiction writing is employed to give voice to human narratives of trauma. The first two novels use documentary style, when the next two use fiction writing, but still push it to certain limits. Philip Caputo, a fiction writer and journalist, in *Acts of Faith* is concerned about civil war in Sudan and sets his novel in this African country, where he explores the flawed nature of his American characters living there. Dealing with the contemporary political situation in Sudan within fictional contexts helps readers grasp the situation. Varvogli’s contribution lies in pointing out the efforts of the writer to distance his writing from the American gaze by displaying the not so innocent nature of his characters and by ending the novel with the point of view of a non-African. Yet, the realization that Caputo is still writing about Africa for the American market suggests the limitations of both views.

4

The investigation continues with Dave Eggers’s *What is the What*, which tells the real life story of Valentino Achak Deng, an American citizen and a refuge from Sudan, once a member of the Lost Boys group. The study touches upon issues of representation of safety and hostility that were raised in the previous section. Yet, hostility is now detected in the American home of Deng. The unstable authorial voices in the novel make a point about identity and fragmentation and suggest a link between spatial and internal displacement, an issue that is also explored in Part III. Although both novels begin with maps, the study questions their usefulness as “visual representations of the other and the ideology of the nation-state” (4). This brings to mind the shaky nature of international politics as well as the representational ambiguities at the time of satellite surveillance and Google maps. Furthermore, in tandem with the arbitrariness of maps as visual representations of different nation-states the arbitrariness of language in the creation of artificial distinctions and misrepresentations of otherness is discussed. Thus, Varvogli suggests that representations of Africa as a contested space and a dark continent of war continue to be common tropes of writing about space in American literature in the twenty-first century.

5

The second comparative essay focuses on Norman Rush’s *Mortals* and Russell Banks’s *The Darling*. These two novels that emphasize their literariness choose to “participate in but also subvert the literary tradition of white imaginative engagement with Africa” (7) through their use of allusion, intertextuality, and self-reflexiveness. Changing their perspective, both novels move from the political to the personal. They investigate what it is and feels to be an American citizen in Africa today. Rush sets his American characters in Botswana and deals with moral issues within disintegrated marriages and gender issues of masculinity and ethnic identity. Although the novel constitutes an example of western cultural intervention, Varvogli notes Rush’s subversive look in his choice to reject the U.S. as the ultimate destination for his characters.

6

In *The Darling*, Banks discusses the transatlantic dimensions of race issues by implicating a white American woman in Liberian politics. Thus, American imperialist policies are once again picked up, while Banks questions historical writing through the use of a highly discontinuous character and narrative voice. Hannah, his female protagonist leaves Africa and moves back to the U.S. only to prove that racial distinctions have not disappeared. Varvogli notes Banks's effort to relate dominant narratives with little stories within the 9/11 context –brought up on the last page of the novel– as well as the relation of fact with fiction in the writer's choice to write about real fears in fictional contexts. Spatial and temporal discontinuities in the novel emphasize the fragmentation of the self, issues that run through the essays in Part II and III. References to Conradian *Heart of Darkness*, the writers' influences from Graham Green and the resort to Duboisian double-consciousness open up great opportunities for further studies that will explore how American representations of African space have evolved. Such issues that admittedly escape the scope of the present study could be investigated elsewhere.

7

Part II, entitled "Travel and Globalization," continues the exploration of selves in contemporary American fiction writing and builds connections with Part I through the writers' games with fact and fiction. The novels that are studied here change their perspective and destination; now travelling to and exoticizing Europe and other parts of the world are investigated. Varvogli proposes interesting connections with Henry David Thoreau's concepts about travel and Washington Irving's ideas about domestic travel, possibly creating fertile ground for further investigation. Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* and Garrison Keillor's *Pilgrims* deal with how ethnicity and identity are redefined through travel and share a nostalgic look at former simpler times. Another issue that informs the study is how latest technologies affect our travel experiences and our perceptions of the "other," by repositioning the American self in a "shrinking, homogenized world" (54).

8

Saving Fish from Drowning is a romantic adventure that offers another example of fictional writing that intentionally blurs fact with fiction. It is narrated by an omniscient narrator who is supposed to lead a group of American tourists from China to Myanmar but dies before the plot unravels. She lives only to tell the story of exploration and abduction of this group. Soon enough it becomes apparent that it is America's view of the exotic country that readers experience. As Varvogli notes, "Amy Tan's version of China is a China that exists primarily for American readers. It is not sanitized and re-packaged in the same way as the organic buckwheat pillows, but it is, above all, shaped by the culture that gives voice to the hyphenated American author" (59). Varvogli draws our attention to the belief that travelling to the East is also travelling into the past, which, unavoidably, implies the superiority of the West. Also, the commercialization of Eastern culture is discussed and updates the concerns of the study. Last but not least, the role of media in a globalized world is central in the novel and proves the victory of capitalism. Nationality and ethnicity become fluid notions as Google Earth has eliminated all distances. The use of comedy, romance, and satire enhance the sense of unconnectedness and fragmentation in the fictional world where media rule uncontrolled.

9

Varvogli sheds light on the artificiality of the writing in *Pilgrims*. As Keillor flirts with old literary tradition, intertextual references are lighthearted. The novel offers comic representations of Minnesotans in Rome, who travel there to honor the grave of a Lake Wobegon war hero. Varvogli selects this novel as it exhibits its connections with European modernist writing, which, however, contrasts with an anti-modernist trend in regional writing. In this novel, travelling to Europe is nodal in the construction and representation of its American characters. The novel raises the question of whether regionalism is a possibility within a globalized world. This is an interesting point that shifts the readers' attention to the fact that regionalism is not authentic, but it is a constructed notion created when relating regional writing to western. This realization informs one of the central issues in the current study; the construction of a self and an identity is always in relation to the gaze of an important other, that is the western other and, more particularly, the American gaze in our case. Travel is a form of education, personal growth, and a return to authenticity where history comes to life (as contrasted to postmodern beliefs by Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard, who regard travelling from Europe to America as a trip from reality to hyperreality). Italy poses as a paradise for the repressed American and constitutes a subversion of the American narrative of the Promised Land. Stereotypical and clichéd material in the novel have a comic effect, while the clever reversals and the triumph of the local over the global reveal the watchful, perceptive gaze of the writer.

10

In the next essay, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* and Eggers's second contribution to this investigation with *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, catch up on the issue of globalization and the possibility – or rather impossibility – of connectedness of self. The idea of travel as a chance to be educated that was expressed in the previous novel alters in Eggers's shrinking world, where “travel, then, becomes a means of escape from their feelings” (74). It is a novel that “borrows from the genres of the road novel and the Bildungsroman and creates a parodic twenty-first century version of the Grand Tour” (75). In it, Will, who comes into a great sum of money, and his friend Hand, set off on a journey around the world in order to give away this money and escape from themselves. What they, ultimately, accomplish, though, is a travel to an “Americanized homogenized world” (74) that depends solely on ticket availability. Therefore, the teleology of travelling is questioned and travelling is experienced as “displacement and dislocation” (75). Varvogli questions Fredrick Jameson's take that globalization entails the export and import of culture due to the unsymmetrical rule of the U.S. over the rest of the world. Although Jameson sees language as a marker of identity and difference, this also poses as an impossibility in the novel because the English language is spoken everywhere and the use of technology helps American culture spread worldwide.

11

Heritage touring becomes a traumatic experience in Foer's semi-autobiographical novel *Everything is Illuminated*, connecting with dark tourism in Part III. It tells the writer's story, a Jewish American, who is in search of the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Travelling offers potentials of transatlantic dreaming and returns to the possibility of identity construction in post-traumatic situations through travelling. Among other things, all novels in Part II deal with travel as a return to the past and a desire for authenticity. Despite the gradual sameness and lack of difference that is

suggested by Eggers, the study tries to express the writers' pressing concern about our gradually-diminishing linguistic, cognitive, and cultural ability to comprehend the fast-changing world around us.

12

As Varvogli states, American story has always been one of dislocation, and Part III, entitled "Dislocation and/ at Home," investigates novels in which different types of dislocation and feelings of fragmentation are experienced by U.S. immigrants both in the land of origin and in the U.S. This section looks more closely at representations of domestic space within national space. In these novels, the characters are exploring routes and roots to discover new ways of being American as the result of an incessant tension between movement and stasis, home and place of origin. The novels that are examined in this part question the importance of home and belonging in the narration of the success story within the legacy of the American Dream. They investigate the relation of home as built space with feelings of dislocation and the impossibility of a stable American identity. Non-linear and rather fragmentary narration is preferred by the writers in order to highlight the fragmentation in the subjects as well.

13

Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and Ethan Canin's *Carry Me across the Water*, deal with seemingly assimilated immigrants. Yet, as their characters fail to come to terms with both their past and their present, a fluid sense of home as a metaphor for nation, family, and self is established. Both novels celebrate their characters' inability to live up to the expectations of the American society. Dislocation is a state of mind and home poses in *A Gesture Life* as a disguise to hide difference and a guilty past. Franklin Hata, the main character and narrator of the story, a born Korean who grew up in Japan and owns a store and a house in Bedley Run, New York, has difficulties in assimilating into the American society and achieving the American Dream since he has failed to establish a happy home and a family within the American nation. Once again, Varvogli stresses the Duboisian double-consciousness in the novel on the grounds that a seemingly perfect home can be highly discomfoting for its residents. The story is narrated in flashbacks, which helps build on the idea of fragmentation. Particularly interesting is Vargioli's idea of the house as a museum containing representations of others. Additionally, images of the mutilated body of the Korean woman and Hata's daughter's abortion suggest the inability of the human body to offer a stable and healthy home for a new life. As blood relations are weak in the novel, home and identity remain variables that are negotiated and never fixed.

14

The feeling of guilt of August Kleinman, a German Jewish by birth and American citizen, for his two criminal actions are central in Ethan Canin's *Carry Me across the Water*. Travelling in this novel is a destabilizing factor. Varvogli sees Kleinman's two crossings – one transatlantic from Germany to the U.S. and one transpacific from the U.S. to Japan – undermining his economic success. Narration depends on a rather unreliable narrator again, and the chronology of the telling of events is mixed up, implying that no simple narrative can be constructed of an immigrant. Although his successful assimilation into the American society is implied by the purchase of different homes, he fails to show any emotional attachment. Identities are made and re-made through the representations of houses in the novel.

15 As the readers read about the characters' complex past and their efforts to be contained within American narratives, the final comparative essay of Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read*

the Air and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* shifts our attention to notions of national identity and how they have been informed in recent years. Mengestu, an Ethiopian-American writes about the experiences of Ethiopian-American Jonas Woldemariam in his effort to recollect snapshots of his past through his investigation of his parents' flee from Ethiopia. As history is highly problematic and unreliable in the novel, storytelling plays an important part and fills the gaps in Jonas's stories. At this point, this return to the African continent is particularly important and helps Varvogli round up her argument. Thus, she establishes an interesting connection with immigrant narratives in Part I, where Africa is portrayed as hell through the American gaze. Yet, in Part III, Africa is presented as hell by the African self of Jonas. The fact that he is an American citizen reveals the power of the American identity to suppress all other weaker ones. Confusing narration in non-chronological order and tropes of fragmentation in the telling of his personal and his parents' stories are employed to tell the African immigrant experience.

16

In the *Namesake*, an example of Indian literature, both internal fragmentation and externally-imposed dislocation are experienced. Gogol's identity is negotiated through two transatlantic journeys, while two train accidents represent the passage to different lives. The acquisition of a name is seen as a marker of successful assimilation into American society and Gogol's inability to have a fixed name proposes his inability to have a fixed national identity. Being accepted by his girlfriends' parents as her 'ethnic' boyfriend is a sign of their cosmopolitanism, while the cheap IKEA furniture suggest, according to Varvogli, "a metaphorical flattening of ethnicity" (134). Thus, Varvogli underlines Lahiri's attempt to draw a new type of American home, one where origins do not really matter and ethnicity is commoditized. In the end, Lahiri rejects a conventional resolution to the immigrant novel. In having Gogol's mother move between two homes in the U.S. and India –of which she has no ownership– she makes a point about a return to the family unit that can provide the comfort and security of a home. Concluding, it is the citizens of the world rather than their ethnic groups or nations that matter at a time when borders are shaky and ethnic or national identities are crushed.

17

The wide range and the great importance of the issues raised in this investigation constitute both its value and its weakness as the danger of jumping into hasty conclusions about new trends in American letters lurks. Yet, as stated earlier, some rather hasty attempts to share a common literary past with literary fathers, such as Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, and Henry David Thoreau can be seen as stepping stones for further and more extensive investigations. All comments about the fictional and meta-fictional games the writers of the novels play display Vargioli's interest in the actual process of fiction writing. They demonstrate how writing is defined by political, economic, and socio-technological parameters that affect travel experiences and the way we talk about them. As it turns out, the American writers of the novels are not detached from the reality around them but are writing within and about it. The thematic, generic, and media concerns of the study reveal the novelists' vigilant eye and their conscious efforts to keep their distance from the American gaze. As the study contributes to the widening of our understanding of contemporary American literature, Varvogli manages to foreground the lack of a general teleological approach to writing about transatlantic travelling. She concludes Part I with the realization that "transatlantic slave journeys to and from Africa continue to shape the world today" (45). By the end of the investigations in Parts II and III, the readers have acquired a taste for contemporary narratives of travel

and dislocation and realize that transatlantic journeys to and from America will continue to incite American imagination.

AUTHOR

DESPOINA FELEKI

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki