Sophia A. McClennen. *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures*. Purdue: Purdue UP, 2002. 304 pp.

Contesting and Reconciling the "Ludic" Postmodern Trope of Exile

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Sophia A. McClennen has written an ambitious book which, as she states at the outset, is meant to "challenge… contemporary theories about cultural identity" (ix). Her intervention on this theoretical terrain stems from her profound disagreement with what she calls the "ludic" postmodern use of "exile" as a metaphor for a "new phase of social alienation," which, as she argues, is at the core of the many strains of cultural studies and border studies. "I found," she writes in her introductory chapter, "that in many scholarly works the term 'exile,' having lost its reference to a painful state of being, was empty of history and an association with material reality. Consequently, this book is dedicated, in part, to reconcile the exile of the theoretical discourse with concrete cases of exile from repressive authoritarian regimes" (1). Thus, her book moves between contesting and reconciling the "ludic" postmodern trope of exile with the figures and literary production of three exiled authors of the Spanish-speaking world: Juan Goytisolo, Ariel Dorfman, and Cristina Peri Rossi.

A secondary but nevertheless important project McClennen undertakes is the critique of the few "explicit theories of exile writing" (39) that have been elaborated in the Hispanic world because, in her opinion, the main theoreticians of exile (Guillén, Seidel, Kaminsky and

Ugarte) cast exile and the literature it produces in binary terms, an approach which she argues is unable to fully grasp and reveal the complexity of exilic texts or the experience of exile. For McClennen the "binary thinking" that underpins these critics' studies of exile literature is to some degree an attempt to define and establish categories for exilic texts by privileging certain textual characteristics over others. The alternative approach she offers introduces the dialectic or dialectical thinking as the most appropriate theoretical framework for interpreting the condition of exile and its textual representation because this experience and its representations are inherently dialectical. "Understanding exile writing as dialectical," writes McClennen, "accounts for the ways that […] oppositions, binaries, and contradictions can exist simultaneously with the same text" (43). While she does concede that these theoreticians of exile "hint" at the dialectics of exile writing, her expressed intention is to not only provide a dialectical reading of her chosen texts, but also to make explicit the theoretical underpinnings of her project. Thus, she proposes in a very short chapter entitled "The Dialectics of Exile: Toward a Theory of Exile Writing" that "[t]o suggest that a productive theoretical approach to exile writing should be organized by a dialectical approach, moreover, allows for a theory of exile that is flexible and fluid, since the particular dialectical aspects of any text will be determined by its specific historical circumstances and narrative components" (43).

If the theoretical chapter on the dialectic could be seen as all too brief given the complexity of this concept, its philosophic tradition, and its ample use in literary and cultural analysis, "Keywords of Exile," a subsection of her "Introduction," proves to be extremely useful for the reader in that she provides excellent definitions of the key terms ("exile," "postmodernism and poststructuralism," "cultural nationalism," "transnationalism," and

"transculturation") upon which she constructs her extended and often complicated arguments. The clarity of this section, thus, prepares the reader for the remaining chapters of the book, structured around what are for her the five primary thematics or problematics of exile writing: nation, time, language, space, and cultural identity.

To summarize or gloss the myriad of arguments which she develops in each of her substantial chapters would simplify and flatten the desired complexity of her arguments and the insightfully complex readings of the post-1960 texts, which form the basis of her theorizing of exile and exile literature. The chapters demonstrate the ways in which Goytisolo, Dorfman and Peri Rossi, despite being postmodern writers, present alternative visions to several basic tenets of "ludic" postmodern thought as found primarily in the work of Baudrillard, Derrida, Bhabha, Deleuze and Guattari: the nomad as a desirable cultural identity; the subversiveness of the different self; the so-called "end of the subject"; and, fragmentation as the ontological characteristic of the postmodern self. Thus, in this book, which maps the intersection of exile literature and postmodernism, we find that the primary element that distinguishes the narratives of exiles from postmodern thought is the writer's condition as an exile.

What, then, constitutes the experience of exile that makes exilic literature in the age of globalized postmodernity different from the experience of the "celebrated" figure of the nomad? What, moreover, has warranted granting exile literature its own place within the classification of literary texts as a separate and distinctive category of writing, particularly in an era when this literature seemingly dovetails with so many aspects of postmodern thinking? While McClennen doesn't answer the latter question, she does respond to the former one, but her response is woven throughout the book, intertwined with the many arguments that

elucidate her five themes of exile. Although laying out the specificities of exile would have been useful for her reader, my sense is that she deploys this critical strategy to de-emphasize several of the characteristics that critical discourse about exile has inextricably linked to its literature: loss, nostalgia, memory (the twin faculties of remembering and forgetting), and trauma. An example of this approach to the literature of exile can be found, for example, in Edward Said's beautifully lucid essay entitled "Reflections on Exile", where he writes that:

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in the exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.[1]

McClennen in her "Acknowledgements" recounts the following story:

> Two early events helped to shape the direction of this book and led me to study exile literature as a challenge to contemporary theories about cultural identity. The first experience took place while I was a graduate student at Duke. Jean Baudrillard came to lecture and he spoke about the Bosnian war. He lectured to a packed auditorium full of faculty and students, fascinated, yet bewildered, by his statements about the end of history and the flat, superficial culture of contemporary society. As I sat taking notes, Ariel Dorfman was in the adjacent seat, rubbing his eyes and fidgeting. When Baudrillard spoke about the farcical

[1] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000): 173.

> media coverage of events in Eastern Europe, Dorfman leaned over, grabbed my pen and wrote "PAIN" on the top of my notebook. Baudrillard could not account for the pain. His view of the world was unable to explain the reality of human suffering and the many ways that artists try to express such pain in their work. I knew then that I wanted to confront the playful way that exiles had been appropriated by theory and stripped of their tragic edge (ix).

Taken as a frame for her book, this is a telling anecdote because it reveals that at its conceptual origin lies Baudrillard's incapacity to acknowledge, understand and explain the "reality" of physical and emotional pain. Although in *The Dialectics of Exile* the pain and emotion of exile are present, they seem muted by their transformation into an emotion-free theoretical and analytical discourse. It is not my intention here to exalt or privilege the pain and sadness of the exile and its textual representation. Because, after all, why should critical discourse about this specific literature be articulated through emotion, when this category is not the theoretical axis for the analysis of other texts arising from equally painful, sad realities and life experiences? Yet, it often seemed as if the only significant difference between Goytisolo, Dorfman and Peri Rossi's texts and postmodern theory is precisely the sense of loss of a homeland, the nostalgia that accompanies it, and the narrative fragmentation that articulates it, which also are characteristics of the Hispanic literature of exile before 1960—seen, for instance, in the texts written by authors exiled from Spain after its Civil War (1936-1939).

Nevertheless, McClennen's book is an important and valuable contribution to the theoretization of exile in the postmodern era because she intelligently and thoroughly reveals the complexities of an important literature.

A Contra corriente

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