

## *Transatlantic Women's Literature* by Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008 (ISBN  
9780784624454). 200pp.

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In *Transatlantic Women's Literature*, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson has produced a complex, nuanced and intricate study belied by the book's seemingly unencumbered title. Through an engaging mix of literary and cultural theory and close reading case-studies, Macpherson presents a cross-section of (primarily) contemporary female-authored transatlantic literature, in the process highlighting the diverse and vibrant nature of the genre. Crossing the border from fiction into memoir and travel literature, Macpherson also challenges the parameters of Transatlantic Studies. Indeed, throughout the book she shows a deep commitment to furthering and expanding the scope and remit of this relatively recent field of study, even expanding geographical boundaries to encompass Canada, South America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe.

Most significantly, in *Transatlantic Women's Literature* Macpherson aims to foreground gender as a central categorisation of difference in transatlantic literature: 'What all these fictional travel narratives have in common is a sense that gender is a condition which impinges upon – even determines – the travel experience' (2008, p. 26). Positioning her work firmly within a post-structuralist feminist framework, she contests the suggestion that the 'loosening of cultural constraints' might negate the significance of gender in women's travel experience: '[I]t appears that the opposite is true; gender remains a key concern throughout the twentieth century in relation to nationhood, nationality, identity and travel' (2008, p. 2).

Furthermore, she explicitly signals a move from the established territory of Transatlantic Studies to date into a more fluid and postmodernist approach:

Transatlantic *literary* criticism explores a number of canonical transatlantic literary relations, often focusing either on pre-twentieth-century or on ‘modernist exiles’; what *Transatlantic Women’s Literature* does is explore how diffuse ideas circulating around such contested terms as ‘the transatlantic’ interact with feminist analysis of gender in later twentieth-century literature. (2008, p. 5, italics in original)

Macpherson’s introduction is rigorous in its engagement with theoretical positioning and issues of methodology and this makes for a demanding opening. Readers already familiar with the myriad theoretical concepts discussed will feel at ease, but those new to the field may have to persevere. Having said that, Macpherson’s style is accessible and concepts are well explained. Simultaneously, the comprehensive literature review will give newcomers a detailed map to further reading but may be somewhat dry for readers already working in the field. After a thought-provoking but exacting opening, the subsequent gear change is refreshing and, in fact, Macpherson’s two-pronged approach is very effective as she segues into close textual analysis.

One slightly confusing feature is the use of nineteenth-century English traveller and writer Isabella Bird’s collection of letters home, *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), as a framing text. Macpherson embarks on this case study in the introduction and circles around to Bird once again in the conclusion. Certainly Bird is one of the most well-known ‘lady travellers’ both of her period and in general, and her inclusion in a study of transatlantic women’s literature is not unusual in itself. However, Macpherson’s very rooted late twentieth-century focus does seem at

odds with Bird's Victorian context. Possibly this is part of an attempt by Macpherson to locate her chosen contemporary texts within traceable traditions of women's travel literature. However, this frame does at times appear a little incongruous and is somewhat distracting and destabilising as the reader attempts to follow the main thrust of the book.

After this brief tangent, Macpherson resumes her principal trajectory, diving into the primary texts for discussion. Here the theoretical concepts explicated in the introduction are put to direct and practical application as Macpherson guides the reader through eight main texts by six authors (Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989), Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica* (1997) and *Stranger on a Train: Daydreaming and Smoking around America with Interruptions* (2002), Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) and *Digging to America* (2006), and Isabel Allende's *Daughter of Fortune* (1999)). The somewhat regimented structure of the book's main body may seem at odds with Macpherson's fluid theoretical and methodological approach. However, once again this dualistic style is surprisingly effective. The main section is divided into three parts, each with an introduction and two chapters, each chapter dealing specifically with one author. Macpherson's combination of lucid prose, concise exposition and adept close reading make each chapter very accessible, even for those readers with no prior knowledge of the primary texts.

Those mining *Transatlantic Women's Literature* for specific themes or concepts will find that section and chapter titles speak astutely for themselves. The three main parts are organised thematically into, 'The Exoticised Other', 'Memoirs and Transatlantic Travel' and 'Negotiating the Foreign/Re-Inventing the Home'. Chapter titles are both elucidating and suggestive, such as

Chapter 2, 'Assimilation in the (Fictional) Heartland: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*' and Chapter 5, "'An Invention of the Americans': Negotiating the Foreign in Anne Tyler's Novels'.

The chapters themselves are bold and ambitious. Macpherson particularly relishes bringing transatlantic readings to texts not hitherto examined in such a light, (such as Allende's *Daughters of Fortune* and Larsen's *Quicksand*), and exploring the work of critically under-investigated authors, such as Anne Tyler, whom she seeks to elevate from the critically pejorative label of 'a domestic realist writer [...] uninterested in the wider world' (2008, p. 130). This fresh, original approach is one of the most appealing features of this work, and Macpherson's confident style is persuasive as the reader is swept through each primary text. This momentum is sometimes jarred by a sense that Macpherson has gone slightly off course, propelling the reader down an adjacent path. Her analyses of discourses of tourism and anti-tourism are fascinating but one does occasionally stop to look around for the gender agenda.

This is particularly the case in the critiques of non-fiction texts. In addition to Part 2, dedicated to memoirs, Macpherson also sidesteps, in the introduction to Part 1, into Jamaica Kincaid's 'scathing' essay against Caribbean tourism, *A Small Place* (1988) (2008, p. 34). Throughout these sections, the discussions on the nature of tourism and the construction of both sightseer and sight seen are provocative, and are woven comfortably into the mesh of Macpherson's overall post-structuralist approach. She convincingly defends her decision to utilise both fiction and non-fiction: 'The juxtaposition of fiction and fact allows for an interrogation into the myriad ways in which female movement is depicted, defined and negotiated' (2008, p. 24), and this in itself poses no continuity problems for the book. However, recurrently women's experience is

not foregrounded as a major category of difference. Therefore, these sections can seem tangential to the gendered heart of this work, despite each chapter's neat concluding return to feminist analysis.

Diversions notwithstanding, Macpherson is ultimately successful in bringing gender to bear on the ways in which transatlantic texts are understood and interpreted. In *Transatlantic Women's Literature*, Macpherson navigates her way through a diverse range of contemporary female-authored texts in answer to the challenge posed by Karen Lawrence:

Can women writers revise the various plots of wandering [...] without succumbing to the traditional pitfalls of these plots for a female protagonist? Such a question intersects feminist concerns about whether women will 'get caught' in their own imitation of patriarchal discourse and myth, unable to repeat with a difference. (Lawrence 1994. *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition*, cited in Macpherson 2008, p. 56)

The key word here is 'difference', and it is this difference in women's experiences of transatlantic travel and emigration that Macpherson skilfully delineates for the reader. Rejecting any form of gender essentialism, Macpherson's post-structuralist feminist standpoint proposes a panoramic view of transatlantic women's literature: '[I]n varying ways, and with varying degrees of resistance and acquiescence, women experience their travelling identities in relation to gendered receptions that highlight and foreground their femaleness' (2008, p. 175).