

FEELING OTHERS' PAIN: POSTCOLONIAL ESSAYS ON LITERARY EMPATHY. Nieves Pascual and Antonio Ballesteros, eds. *Feeling in Others: Essays on Empathy and Suffering in Modern American Culture*. Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2008.

*Feeling in Others* is an immensely interesting book, one that is worth having on the shelf regardless of one's particular field of study. Through eight critical essays of the highest standard, this book gives the reader both an overview and a profound analysis of the manifold faces of pain in the arts. Additionally, the book includes a selection of paintings by the Spanish artist Marina Núñez that beautifully (but also disturbingly) illustrate the insights contained in this volume.

This collection is divided into different parts according to the different subject matters that revolve around the idea of pain. The first part, dealing with race, comprises two essays, the first of which analyses pain in relation to the female body in Louise Erdrich's *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. Kurjatto-Renard studies the intergenerational conversation established among characters in this novel, which the author sets against a backdrop of ethnic fusion, elements of the Ojibwe tradition and a universe of symbolic names. Kurjatto-Renard's perspective, full of admiration for her author, emphasizes a reading of hope in the novel, one in which the text serves as a vehicle for communicating the force of serenity confronting pain and the necessity of accepting it in our lives. In this same part of the book, and through the analysis of several poems written by two male Chicano and six Chicana writers, Oliva Cruz argues the subversion of female archetypes carried out in a significant part of Chicano/a literature. These archetypes, which once were linked to submission and shame, after the arrival of the Chicano Movement turned into symbols of pride and resistance in the works analysed. Through the visions of authors coming from very different backgrounds, Oliva shows the diverse views that characterize the present-day Chicano understanding of pain and of the female body as its principal recipient, both in real-life Chicano and

Mexican societies and in the mythical stories that deal with Mexico's legends and folklore. In doing so, Oliva manages to outline a rich panorama of the reconsiderations of the "classical" Chicano myths, that explains the central role of the female experience and the construction of female sensitivity in modern Chicano writing.

Gender is the topic of the second part of the book, which opens up with Isabel Durán's essay on breast cancer narratives. For Durán, cancer writing means a "return of the real" (51) whose vision questions the romanticized understanding of illness "à la Baudelaire" (52), that is, the display of the crudity of living with cancer in a literary style that could closely resemble naturalism. Durán poses the critical interest in trauma and disability studies as the next great topic for critical discussion after class, gender and race. She possibly makes here a covert reference to the canon of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, when she compares the new narratives of pain to the ordered, pristine world of Goethian novels of development. The way in which Durán wisely interprets such comparison radicates in the ability of cancer narratives to become universal—as her choice of primary sources: the work of American black poet Audre Lord, the essays of Spanish Sociology professor María Ángeles Durán and the autobiography of the daughter of a former Spanish Prime Minister Mariam Suárez, consequently shows. For Durán, "autocryptography" helps the threatened self to rebuild itself into a coherent sense of completion. She then goes on to discuss the impact of war lexis on the description, treatment and indeed on the very concept of cancer and the individual will to control it. Through this, she establishes bold connections between war and masculinity, by associating the attack of illness and the reactions of the self and the community (doctors, family, friends) to a very particular "gender trouble," to put it in Judith Butler's terms: the one undergone by women, suffering from a fundamentally female condition, behaving towards it as men do on the battlefield. However, for these writers there exists a specifically feminine focus: the important fact that it is not the battle itself that matters most, but the outcome, survival and the miracle of life.



After an illuminating discussion of the cultural perception of pain starting from the times of Greek philosophy onwards, Gudrun M. Grabher's essay analyses Susan Dodd's *The Mourners' Bench*, offering an extensive study of the experience of brain tumour from a different perspective. The novel does not concentrate so much on how words can express pain to rebuild a coherent sense of self (as it was the case of the cancer narratives explored by Durán in the previous essay); rather, it shows how silence can serve as a tool for communicating pain between people who achieve a special level of understanding, when pain becomes unutterable, far too subjective, and unique. The important thing is not to define or describe pain itself, but to express, as accurately as possible, the state in which the individual finds himself/herself when pain has to be articulated, something for which Grabher acutely uses Wittgenstein's celebrated final sentence of his famous *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* (1921).

The third part of the book peers into the relation between pain and class. The first essay in this section is Iren Annus's enlightening study about the representation of pain in American painting, from its early, idealized representations of the first American heroes (by Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley). Through the substitution of physical pain for visionary or sacred pain, their paintings tried to maintain the heritage of the idea of pain as an art, that comes from the Middle Ages. For the author, there is a clear difference between this highly stylized representation of physical pain and the less subtle depictions of psychological pain (portrayed through actions like crying, kneeling or fainting) characteristic of paintings and engravings dealing with the suffering of marginalized sectors of the American population (like blacks and women). Annus thus points at the connection between pain as a clear feature of marginalized circles and the fact that most canonical painters in America have been white, male, and respectful towards the dominant value codes. This study, therefore, profusely develops the discussion of both American and European romantic painting, since some of the most prominent European painters, like Goya, Delacroix and Gericault, devoted large parts of their production to the depiction of pain

as felt by marginalized sections of the population and as seen or imagined by artists in the times of the Napoleonic campaigns.

One of the most interesting essays in this collection is Erik Kielland-Lund's analysis of the function of violence in identity formation in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Kielland-Lund draws an illustrative background to explain how and why a novel like *Fight Club*, which started as a mere first novel by an unknown author, went on to become a turning point in American postmodern fiction and gave its author a celebrity status. Kielland-Lund establishes connections with Lasch, Bly and other feminist theorists to analyse the need for power and violence in the male psyche. *Fight Club* presents itself as one of the defining traits of "the desperate anomaly" (121) of the newly defined grey collar class consciousness in modern America. For Kielland-Lund, *Fight Club* is a logical step forward into the literary tradition of the Puritans, Thoreau and the Beat generation, since physical pain is understood in the novel as a proof of life, like Thoreau's experience in his Walden cabin. Palahniuk's idea goes, however, in the opposite direction: both authors, one at each extreme of the continuum of American writers reject the American Dream and protest against the consumerism of their times. One does it through pacifism, the other through violence. Using dichotomies such as rural versus urban, nature versus debris, with Palahniuk's novel we pass "from Thoreau, the 19th-century Transcendentalist, to Tyler Durden, the millennial anarchist" (123-124).

Nieves Pascual opens the last section of this remarkable book, devoted to pain in relation to space. In "The Architecture of Illness" she analyses narratives of anorexia to explore the interrelation between body and health *versus* illness; something that has preoccupied some of the most prominent architects since Roman times. The anorectic patient objectifies herself in her quest for a personal space that finds its perfect definition in the controlled, and controlling, space of hunger —she creates her own body. Pascual supports her point by establishing associations between the description of the conditions of several anorectic patients told in their

own words, and the buildings they have visited or inhabited. The result is a deep reflection on the lives and suffering of these patients, whose visions are often misunderstood or ignored.

The book closes with Antonio Ballesteros González's essay on *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's Holocaust narrative in comic book form. For Ballesteros, the narration of the Holocaust horror is depicted through a vehicle that comprises both narration and image. It purposely serves both fragmentary representation—a mirror representation of the image of abandoned, mutilated corpses that haunts the collective memory of the Holocaust—and the depiction of the author's quest for coming to terms with his father (a survivor from the Auschwitz camp who developed a complex, painful relation to his own and others' suffering). The author's unavoidable sense of guilt, transmitted to him by his parents, experiences an impossible and masochist reverie because he himself did not suffer at the concentration camps, which stands both as an

atonement for his parents' torment and, as Ballesteros points out, "a paradoxical yearning for the real" (153).

At the beginning of this review, it was stated that *Feeling in Others* is a splendid critical work for many reasons, some of which deserve to be pointed out: its variety in perspectives and primary sources under analysis; the informative, and at the same time profound, scope of its essays (which makes it a real pleasure to be read); and its interdisciplinary approach, or even its careful editing process, which shows in the final result. However, there is one reason which is probably the most important of all: the special insight, and indeed the urgency, of works which help us understand the pain of others, regardless the face of that pain, in troubled times like ours. Everyday we are witnessing the suffering of many, near and far from us, and in too many different ways.

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