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Moira Baker, Radford University, USA

Facing the Crises

Review of In the Face of Crises: Anglophone Literature in the Postmodern World edited by Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. 204pp.

Timely, provocative, and theoretically sophisticated, the essays comprising In the Face of Crises: Anglophone Literature in the Postmodern World situate their work amid several critical global concerns: the devastation wreaked by global capitalism following the worldwide financial crash, the financial sector's totalizing grip upon the world economy, the challenge to traditional definitions of "human nature" and identity posed by technologies of the body and of warfare, the quest of indigenous communities for healing from the continuing traumatic effects of colonization, and the increasing corporatization of the academy as an apparatus of the neo-liberal state – to specify only a few. Edited by Professors Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, these essays deploy a broad range of contemporary theories, representing recent developments in cultural studies, the new economic criticism, postcolonial film studies, feminism and gender studies, and the new historicism. The eleven essays selected by Matek and Rehlicki offer convincing support for their claim that humanistic research delving into Anglophone literature, far from being a "non-profitable" pursuit in an increasingly technologized society, affords clarifying insights into contemporary "economic, cultural, and social processes in the globalizing and globalized culture of the West" (ix).

The six lucidly argued essays of Part I, "In the Face of Crises," analyze literary or cinematic representations of economic, cultural, and social crises that confront the postmodern world. A review of just four of these essays suggests the scope of the collection and the significance of the issues they tackle and the crises they face. Sven Cvek's brilliant reading of Colson Whitehead's

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post-apocalyptic zombie novel, Zone One (2011), argues that it is paradigmatic of other recent speculative fictions of crisis forming a loose genre which registers the upheavals caused by the increasing dominance of the financial sector in the neoliberal global economy ("Surviving Utopia in Zone One"). Cvek reads Zone One and similar post-apocalyptic fictions written after one of the largest financial collapses in U. S. history as symptomatic of the "socially destructive logic" of neoliberal capitalism (13). Following upon this essay, Stipe Grgas challenges the field of American Studies to consider new disciplinary boundaries and methodologies that speak to extra-textual events like the worldwide economic collapse and the financialization of capital that, at least in part, caused it ("The Figure of the Financier in Dreiser and Delillo"). Grgas offers a bracing reading of Theodore Dreiser's The Financier (1912) and Don De Lillo's Cosmopolis (2003), arguing that both novels represent capitalism – specifically the financial industry that drives globalization – as an opaque, inscrutable, totalizing system. Now, more than ever, Grgas suggests, literary scholarship and criticism should intervene in economic questions, just as economics should attend to how literature represents capitalism's mystifications.

The essays by Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljak Rehlicki engage Baudrillard's concepts of simulation, simulacra, and the "hyperreal" in their readings of Phillip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep (1968) and Anthony Swofford's Jarhead (2003), respectively. Matek argues that Dick's novel affirms the humanity of the central character, Deckard, as it both evokes a postapocalyptic world blighted by nuclear destruction and questions the distinctions among cyborgs, androids, and humans ("Dreaming of Electric Sheep: Technology and the Construction of Human Identity"). Matek demonstrates that the novel inscribes postmodernist doubts about human identity and autonomy, problematizing the very notion of a stable human nature. Yet the novel also envisions the capacity to empathize with "otherness" as essential to maintaining one's humanity and asserting agency in the face of a postmodern technocratic State with its totalizing institutions. And that capacity to empathize extends even to the radically other, non-human androids. Matek's adept reading of this mordantly subversive novel illuminates what Jason Vest has characterized as the "postmodern humanism" of Phillip K. Dick's substantial oeuvre (Vest xi-xiv).

Dovetailing with Matek's work, Jasna Roljak Rehlicki's essay offers an intertextual analysis of Anthony Swofford's Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles (2003) in

relation to Jean Baudrillard's controversial essay, "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" (1991). Rehlicki considers how the conditions of postmodern, ultra-technologized warfare, in which combatants do not experience direct fighting, can be as devastating to the soldier as earlier, more traditionally conducted, wars have been ("The Mirage of War in Anthony Swofford's Jarhead"). Suggesting that Swofford's memoir of the Gulf War can be productively read in view of Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, Rehlicki notes that the media-produced spectacle of the war engendered a hyperreality which substituted its own simulation for the reality of war. Far from denying the carnage of the Gulf War, Baudrillard later asserted that the very real violence of this "armed mystification" left "100,000 Iraqi dead," yet was thoroughly overwritten by the simulacrum dished up to a duped and compliant public by CNN and other media outlets (Baudrillard 72). That simulacrum posited a clean, minimalist war with little "collateral damage" fought to establish a "New World Order" characterized by universal peace and security. Rehlicki argues that Swofford, who served as a U. S. Marine during the 42 day Gulf War, shares something of Baudrillard's disgust with this war as a "mirage," though for quite different reasons. Having seen no direct combat, Swofford feels that the war was a simulacrum, with no real fighting, no real victory, and no heroism for the disillusioned and alienated would-be warrior. Concluding Part I of the collection, Rehlicki's essay strikingly justifies the editors' assertion that literature and literary studies afford us a "means of understanding our existence in the postmodern world" (ix).

Equally varied and stimulating, the five essays gathered in Part II, " New Perspectives on Literary Genres," offer further evidence that the most current approaches to literary study afford valuable insights into the contemporary world and its many crises. Jadranka Zlomislic's study of the American academic novel, focusing on Mary McCarthy's The Groves of Academe (1952) and Randal Jarrell's Pictures of an Institution (1954), offers an adept new historicist reading of these novels in view of the 1950's Cold War hysteria of McCarthyism, on the one hand, and vapid attempts at progressive educational reform, on the other ("Satire and the Academic Novel"). Zlomislic exposes how the seemingly perpetual "crises in higher education" are rooted in larger political forces – both conservative and progressive – that vie for hegemony, using the academy as one site of contestation and opening up spaces for self-interested opportunists to work the politicized territory to their own advantage in their quest for tenure, promotion, and fame. Engaging

both feminist and postfeminist thought, Selma Veseljevic Jerkovic offers a balanced and nuanced analysis of chick-lit – 21st century feminism's l'enfant terrible – within the context of the multi-billion dollar beauty, fashion, and women's magazine industries ("'Because I deserve it!'—Fashion and Beauty Industries in the Service of Patriarchy: The Tale of Chick-Lit"). The beauty myth promulgated by chick-lit and these other ideological apparatuses have, according to Naomi Wolf, replaced the patriarchal discourse of domesticity as the most powerful regulatory regime that monitors and regulates women's lives in the West. Although "postfeminism" is a vexed term, Jerkovic cites feminist cultural theorists like Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie who characterize it as a "sensibility" encompassing active pursuit of sexual subjectivity; self-surveillance and disciplining of one's own body; relentless self-improvement; choice and empowerment especially as a consumer of beauty products, surgeries to enhance the body, and men; pleasing oneself. Chick-lit, Jerkovic contends, inscribes these values and interpellates readers as consumers who seek empowerment, equality, and independence in these ways. Thus, Jerkovic argues, these key feminist notions are appropriated by chick-lit and postfeminism while they are simultaneously depoliticized. Although "patriarchal assumptions permeate the genre" and "chick-lit is still haunted by the ghost of patriarchy," Jerkovic acknowledges that the genre – at least – emphasizes the importance of choice and self-definition while also exposing the impossible demands for bodily perfection that patriarchy still imposes upon women, as liberated and empowered as they may feel.

As a collection, Facing the Crises demonstrates the powerful ways in which contemporary literary and cultural studies offer insight and understanding as we confront questions that the present moment urges upon us: whether the most sweeping questions about the global economy and the seeming state of perpetual war, or the most intimate questions about the body and desire. Each essay engages crucial questions, while positing some provocative answers. Together they afford a remarkably rich and varied examination not only of contemporary Anglophone literature but also of the most current approaches to literary and cultural studies.

Works Cited

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