

ON THEIR OWN PREMISES: SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE HOMEPLACE

Constante González Groba

Valencia: Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans, Universitat de València, 2008.

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Mississippi author Kathryn Stockett has successfully described in her debut novel *The Help: A Novel* (2009) the social and political centrality of family, home and community in the history of the American South. This is a topic that still interests and appeals to both writers and readers as proven by the acclaim with which the book has been received. Southern writer Eudora Welty, commenting on Jane Austen's works, had already recognized the interest of home and the homeplace: "Jane Austen was born knowing a great deal—for one thing, that the interesting situations of life can, and notably do, take place at home" (1969: 5). Welty went even further when she pointed out the need to relate issues such as time, place, and society to Austen's condition as a woman: "As all her work testifies, her time, her place, her location in society, are no more matters to be taken in question than the fact that she was a woman" (1969: 4).

What Constante González Groba offers in *On Their Own Premises: Southern Women Writers and the Homeplace* is, precisely, a carefully planned and convincingly developed theoretical study of the centrality of domesticity in relation to female experience in the literature of the American South. González Groba's vindication of the social and political relevance of family, home and community is judiciously presented and analyzed in its duality and ambivalence. Therefore, in the author's own words "Home and the domestic are most often portrayed as both restrictive and liberating, as something that both oppresses and expresses women" (17).

Even though the book is centered on the study of the portrayal of the domestic space by Southern women writers since the 1890s, and the author devotes different chapters to the analysis of works by Kate Chopin, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Zora Neale Hurston, Lillian Smith, Eudora Welty, Alice Walker, Lee Smith, Jill McCorkle, and Bobbie Ann Mason, Chapter One entitled “Theories and Contexts” is useful and enlightening to any literary critic interested in the meaning and usage in literature in general, and in American literature in particular, of notions such as place, space, house, or home and their relation to women. The same chapter offers a documented analysis of the unfixed, contested and multiple meanings of home.

The chapter begins by locating the social and cultural construction of home as a woman’s place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a product of the new urban industrial order, the separation of public life from the private sphere and the increasing expansion of the suburban middle-classes. In this first chapter, González Groba makes the issue of home in Southern fiction revolve around the axes of gender, class, and race; and he also takes very much into account the evolution of gender relations to home and the household after the Civil War. Finally, he focuses on the contemporary debate that separates those critics who maintain the empowering, liberating and even subversive potential of home and family to be detected in Southern fiction written by women, from those who defend the particular interest of contemporary white and black Southern women writers in vindicating women’s need to break away from the nightmarish trap of their dwellings.

On their Own Premises offers what can be considered a history of Southern literature by women in the twentieth century. Therefore, its author appropriately begins his analysis on the eve of the twentieth century with a study of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* published in 1899, at a moment of transition in which the traditional Victorian imposition of separate spheres was beginning to be seriously questioned. The author cautiously analyses the complex relationship of Edna Pontellier to the different spaces that surround her and her preference for liminal and open spaces such as the sea or the streets.

Chapter Three advances in the twentieth century and offers a study of Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man* (1926). If closeness, routine and convention suffocated the protagonist of *The Awakening*, González Groba provides a counterpoint with his analysis of the relationship between space and Ellen Chesser, the protagonist of Roberts’s novel, a southern female tenant farmer forced to lead an itinerant life. Madox Robert’s novel provides a well-chosen instance of how an ideal of domesticity —and the formality, fixity and repetition spiritually or metaphorically related to it— can occasionally provide women with reassurance, comfort and security.

Chapter Four provides another example of an itinerant female protagonist, Janie, the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1978). Gates and fences, the store and the parlour, are new liminal spaces in which mulatta Janie strives to find an identity and a voice of her own.

The South as a Segregated House is the topic of Chapter Five in which white and black women and the connotations of their respective bodies and sexuality are related to the dichotomy Coloured Town vs. White Town analyzed in Lillian Smith's work.

The ambivalent attitude of Southern women writers towards home and the homeplace, that González Groba theoretically exposed in the first chapter of the book, is proven most pertinent in the chapter that he devotes to the analysis of Eudora Welty's short fiction where he studies the rootlessness of mobility as well as the rootedness of domesticity in stories such as "Death of a Traveling Salesman", "Clytie", "Livvie", and in the novella *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Chapter Seven focuses on quilting and domesticity in the work of Alice Walker, making thus explicit the two main topics studied in *On Their Own Premises* in relation to women: space and art. Notwithstanding its subtitle, place and home are not the only axes around which the book whirls but also the relationship between women and art and the spatial implications of this pair. Therefore, the artistic aspirations of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, Janie's powers of oratory in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or Laurel's creativity in *The Optimist's Daughter* are appropriately accounted for in relation to women's need of a place, a room of their own in which to develop their creativity.

Female domestic art is precisely a recurrent topic in Lee Smith's short stories and novels. Chapter Eight proves Smith's interest in portraying women's traditional vindication of the domestication of art as a source of satisfaction and even empowerment as against an elitist conception of art and of the figure of the artist. Recalling Maurice Beebe's seminal distinction between the image of the artist on an Ivory Tower as opposed to the creator as a Sacred Fount (1964), one might conclude that Smith is claiming the homeplace as a Sacred Fount at which women can nourish their artistic appetites.

As the book advances in the twentieth century, we find the protagonists having to come to terms with the transition and flux involved in modernization. Thus, Jill McCorkle's *Tending to Virginia*, studied in Chapter Nine, offers a good instance of how Southern women have had to learn to overcome both the protection and nurturing of the homeplace but also its backwardness and limitations.

Finally, Bobbie Ann Mason is studied in the last chapter of the book as an example of a Southern writer who has clearly described in positive terms the consequences for women of entering what is called the "house of modern America" (276). In Mason's short stories women's identity is no longer necessarily attached to a

physical place in which they are forced to remain but is rather related to the “sense of place” that Irish Poet Seamus Heaney defined as a marriage between a geographical place and a spiritual one (1980). This “sense of place” allows Southern women to freely choose whether to remain at home, to transcend it or to come back whenever they feel that need.

On Their Own Premises, therefore, displays the great distance Southern women have covered from their confinement to the domestic sphere to having the chance to choose a space of their own. And this trajectory has been studied with reference to distinctions of gender, class and race as is pertinent to the literature of the American South. However, we should not forget that in the particular the universal is contained, and much of what we learn in the book can be very well applied to other traditional regions and even countries in which women have undergone similar spatial restrictions, and to the literature which has accounted for them.

I have already pointed out that *On their Own Premises: Southern Women Writers and the Homeplace* is more than a judicious study of the poetics of space in relation to women in Southern literature, that the book is also an analysis of women’s interest in art and a reflection of women’s artistry as dealt with in fiction, and that it may, in fact, be considered a comprehensive history of Southern literature by women. This last point is finally grounded in the representative dimension of the authors and works included and studied: the author has carefully chosen authors who are witnesses of changes in the twentieth century, and well-known representative figures who have contributed to endowing the literature of the American South with a distinctive social and artistic flavour. Beside the nine Southern writers included, many others are mentioned, and this together with the constant allusions to historical and social changes in the history of the South as well as the impressive bibliography consulted, makes the volume a valuable contribution by a well-known specialist in Southern literature.

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Received: 2 November 2009