

## **Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Chicago 2014**

Romanian Studies Association of America

Session Type: Non-guaranteed single entity

Session organizer: Dr Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru, University of Bucharest, Romania

### **Title of Session: East European Women's Tales of Relocation**

**Presider:** Domnica Radulescu (Washington and Lee University)

Panelists and paper titles:

Rachel Trousdale (Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA), "Witches Against War: Dubravka Ugresic's Baba Yaga International"

Marta Bladdek (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY), "From Russia, with Ambivalence: Young Female Immigrants in Recent Fiction by post-Soviet Jewish American Women Writers"

Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru (University of Bucharest), "Traveling Tales: Migration as Translation in Domnica Radulescu's *Train to Trieste* and *Black Sea Twilight*"

### **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

The proliferation of narrative forms in today's global mediated world has been explored in literary theory and criticism, linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and policy making. Postcommunist Eastern Europe, which scholars such as Katherine Verdery consider the new postcolonial zone and a significant new site of global political and cultural exchange, has produced an increasing wave of narratives in the space of global writing in English since 1989. Tales of relocation are formally associated with the novel genre, which provides a space for reflection on the social. Yet, they involve a far more dynamic, process-oriented ethos, which, even when formally expressed in novel form, can be more readily conceptualised as the open-ended stories we live by, testimonies, Fludernik's "natural narratives" (1996), Porter Abbott's "universal narrative" (1998) or Adelson's "touching tales" of different forms of alterity related to the same referent (2000).

As the conditions of migrant life are changing, migration studies have been focusing on gender as a key factor in the constitution of transnational subjectivities. Individual studies tend to engage, however, with issues confronting Asian and Latin American women (Hirsch 2000; Shneider 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Schultermandl 2009; Schultermandl and Toplu 2010) and to a certain extent Jewish migrant women, mostly within wider approaches to the Holocaust (Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári 2009; Glajar and Teodorescu 2011). Approaches to transnational narratives by and about women have also privileged the case of Asian, Central and Latin American authors (Fouron and Schiller 2001; Ryan 2002; Dyck 2007). Studies on East European women's migration have been published (Stanford Friedman 1998; Hoffman 2000; Glajar and Radulescu 2004), but they haven't focused specifically on narrative strategies and challenges to narrative patterns as ways in which the

changing status of women is reflected on, despite the expansion of narrative writing by migrant East European women in recent years.

The presentations included in this panel interrogate the importance of narrative strategies in writing women's migration histories and look at how various set narrative forms or tales (fairy tale, coming of age story, immigrant story and memoir) provide a framework for reflecting on, processing and overcoming traumatic outcomes of women's migration. The panel will be chaired by Domnica Radulescu, whose double perspective on women's tales of relocation – as a novelist analysed in this panel and as a literary critic who has published extensively on this topic – will contribute to the complexity of the discussion.

Rachel Trousdale will focus on Dubravka Ugresic's 2007 *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* and show that, within the literary space of the novel, the Slavic folkloric character Baba Yaga becomes a protean figure. Ugresic's Baba Yaga, a figure of the personal fear of death and loss and of a Slavic culture of shared folklore and aesthetics, comes to embody the possibility of an international feminist revolution. In the novel's three sections, Ugresic turns witches (standard fairy tale characters) into multivalent figures of loss, redemption, and unity. Each part invokes Baba Yaga as response to the predicaments faced by women in post-Communist Eastern Europe. In *Baba Yaga*, Ugresic, a controversial non-resident Croatian novelist, responds to critics in the Croatian press who called her a "witch" by suggesting that the traditional Slavic witch unites the very groups the nationalists sought to divide. While Baba Yaga provides the basis of a cultural claim for pan-Slavic unity, Ugresic also makes her into a still more ambitious figure: an international figure of feminist revolt.

Marta Bladek's presentation will examine recent fiction bordering on memoir by post-Soviet Jewish American women writers. In Lara Vapnyar's *Memoirs of a Muse* (2006), Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis* (2007), and Ellen Litman's *The Last Chicken in America* (2007), young female immigrants move to the United States on the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse. These fictional works (a first-person narrative, a farcical novel, and a novel in linked stories, respectively) update the classic male-centered coming of age and immigrant story genres and show how gender underwrites acculturation into American society. The protagonists negotiate the contradictions between Soviet and American notions of family relationships and obligations, sexual freedom, and economic independence that prescribe women's choices. The aim of the presentation will be to suggest that Tanya, Sasha, and Masha neither totally reject the old nor uncritically embrace the new gendered scripts. Instead, they come into their own having grappled with both and finding that neither allows for the kind of life they had imagined for themselves.

Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru's presentation will focus on the use of translation and/or transposition in migration writing in English in a comparative reading of the novels *Train to Trieste* (2008) and *Black Sea Twilight* (2010) by Romanian American writer Domnica Radulescu. On their escape route from bondage to freedom, the female protagonists of these novels explore various alternative reinventions of home. The presentation will identify some of the ways in which forms of translation and elements of what Rosi Braidotti would call a nomadic textuality mediate relocation in the two novels and will aim to show that translation/transposition (into English, but also music and painting), as well as the reinvention of one's self in a new country and the resolution of past traumas, is always a matter of negotiation in the present (as suggested by the compelling present tense of much of Radulescu's narrative discourse and by the strong visual dimension which dominates especially the latter novel). The presentation will argue that, as diasporic cultures are becoming "traveling cultures" (James Clifford, "Diasporas", 1994), the fluidity of such

nomadic narratives not only overcomes older imperialist binarisms, but also acts as a space of reflection on the deterritorialized status of its authors.

In engaging with the ways in which conventional narrative forms are reworked into discursive strategies of reconciliation between Eastern Europe's totalitarian past and the protagonists' present of relocation in the "New World", the three presentations share an interest in examining alternative ways of writing migrant women's personal histories. Narrative discourse (conventional or otherwise) becomes a strategy through which the "real life" issues of women's migration are effectively examined, re-imagined and challenged.

## PANELISTS' BIOS

**1) Rachel Trousdale** (panelist) is an Associate Professor of English at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, GA. Her book *Nabokov, Rushdie, and the Transnational Imagination* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010. She has also researched and published on identity formation in Isak Dinesen; feminist histories in Marjane Satrapi; intertextual borrowings from Nabokov in Michael Chabon and James Merrill; the relationship between humor and the transcendent in Marianne Moore; and humor and nationalism in W.H. Auden. She is now working on a project on humor in modern American poetry. She received her PhD from Yale University in 2002.

**2) Marta Bladek** (panelist) works as Reference Librarian at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York (CUNY). She received a Ph.D. in English from the Graduate Center, CUNY, and an M.L.I.S. from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Her dissertation explored the interplay of place, memory, and return in contemporary life writing. Her research and publications focus on women's autobiography, Holocaust-related memoirs, and post-Soviet Jewish literature. Since 2009 especially, she has been writing and presenting on topics related broadly related to Eastern Europe. In particular, she gave conference talks on "Prava and Asbestos 2: Emigrant Encounters with post-Soviet reality in Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* and Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis*" (MLA 2011), "The Perils of Going Back: Seeking and Making Roots in Lisa Pearl Rosenbaum's *A Day of Small Beginnings*," and "Between Allegiance and Ambivalence: Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Jewish American Literature" (both at the 2009 MLA Convention). She wrote reviews of recent Eastern European women's memoirs for the *Women's Review of Books*, and her Holocaust-related essays have appeared in edited essay collections.

**3) Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru (organizer and panelist)** is Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Bucharest, Romania. She holds a PhD in philosophy (on the aesthetics of postmodernism) from the University of Bucharest (2000) and a second one in literature (on contemporary Indian fiction in English) from the University of East Anglia (2007). Her main research and teaching interests are women's writing, contemporary literatures in English, postcolonialism, postmodern reinterpretations of consecrated art/literature forms and Ethnic and African American literatures. She has published articles in journals such as *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Perspectives* and *The European Journal of American Culture*. Some of her recent books are: *Women's Voices in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, vols. I and II (co-edited with Mădălina Nicolaescu and Helen Smith,

Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press, 2005 and 2006); *Identity Performance in Contemporary Non-WASP American Fiction* (Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press, 2008) and *Performance and Performativity in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming 2012).

4) **Domnica Radulescu** (presider) is an award winning, best-selling fiction writer, a playwright, a theater director and is the Edwin A. Morris Professor of French and Italian literature at Washington and Lee University. She is the author of two novels: *Black Sea Twilight* (Doubleday 2010, 2011) and *Train to Trieste* (Knopf 2008, 2009) which was published in twelve languages and won the 2009 Library of Virginia Fiction Award. Her first play *Naturalized Woman* was presented as a full production at the Thespis Theater Festival in New York City off, off Broadway in 2012. She is the author, editor or co-editor of nine scholarly books on theater, exile and representations of women and has directed over twenty plays in the United States, France and Romania. She has been awarded the 2011 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia and is the recipient of a 2007 Fulbright teaching and research fellowship to Romania for a project on theater and gender. She is working on her third novel *Country of Red Azaleas* and on a new play *The Town with 'Very Nice' People*.