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**Gabriela Gahlia Modan, Turf Wars: Discourse, Diversity, and the Politics of Place. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, 357 pp.**

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## Book reviews

### **Gabriela Gahlia Modan, *Turf Wars: Discourse, Diversity, and the Politics of Place*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, 357 pp.**

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Gabriela Gahlia Modan's *Turf Wars* is a stimulating and entertaining ethnography of Mt. Pleasant, a dramatically socially diverse neighbourhood in Washington DC which, over the last decades, has been facing processes of gentrification. It is an original and highly interdisciplinary work which draws on sociolinguistics, anthropology, and cultural geography to provide a revealing picture of daily life in the neighbourhood and an exhaustive overview of discourses and practices about identity and diversity.

The author, in fact, analyses the discourses through which community members create and contest visions of the place in which they live. As stated in the first pages of the book, *Turf Wars* is about the politics of place, i.e. about the different discursive practices through which people with divergent interests "define, negotiate and redefine the places they live as particular kinds of communities populated by particular kinds of people" [p. 5].

Through discourse and practice community members establish what the authentic identity of the neighbourhood is and who their legitimate members are – *centralized identity* for themselves as core community members and *marginalized identities* for others, considered as lesser community members. The neighbourhood emerges as a highly contested and conflictive place, where different groups struggle for the control of territory and the do and don'ts in its public space: the "turf wars" cited in the title.

The book is divided into two parts: the first is dedicated to the ethnography itself, while the second discloses "the making of" the book by exposing the theoretical and scholarly background of the research. In the first chapter the reader learns about the neighbourhood ("one of Washington DC's most economically and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods" [p. 7] in which gentrification is reducing diversity on the one hand and progressively *commodifying* it on the other), about the context of the research (the mid 1990s) as well as about the methodology and research techniques; we also learn what it means to be a researcher and a community member at the same time, as is the case of the author.

In the second chapter Modan provides a more in-depth sketch of Mt. Pleasant's history and social geography within the context of the District of Columbia, showing how demographic changes (first white then Afro-Americans, Latinos, Vietnamese and others) and the ups and downs of the housing market gave rise to its current social landscape: a very ethno-racially and economically diverse place and an attraction for investors and gentrifiers – with its deprived housing stock that started to be renovated from the 1970s.

Modan constantly shows how ethno-racial and class relations are articulated through space: residential patterns, symbolic frontiers and different uses of space reveal Mt Pleasant's "moral geography." The latter, borrowed from Jane Hill's work and defined as "the interweaving of a moral framework with a geographical territory" [p. 90] is the theme of the third chapter, when we get to the heart of ethnography.

The main frame in Mt. Pleasant's "moral geography" is the "city vs suburbs," a dichotomy that is used to "organize and spatialize divergent value systems" [p. 97] and to which many other dichotomies are related: heterogeneity vs. homogeneity, ideology vs. reality, order vs. disorder, public vs. private, interaction vs. individualism, social control vs. law-and-order, etc. Modan analyses all these "axes of contrast" giving ethnographic as well as theoretical examples and focusing in particular on the role of gender in place identity construction. City in fact indexes masculinity – a dangerous place for fearless people – while suburbs index femininity – a safe place for fearful people. Gender is also a key issue in dealing with the access to public space, complicated – as usual – by the fact that in Mt Pleasant "power relations between men and women become intertwined with local power relations among ethnic groups" [p. 120]. In particular we are shown how discourses of fear and fearless are used as strategies to marginalise some groups – mostly Latino men.

In the fourth chapter the marginalization theme is deepened by taking into consideration a grant proposal for public toilets: Modan shows that while the promoters' aim is to celebrate diversity and improve quality of life in the neighbourhood, they end up constructing hierarchical relationships between different groups.

The fifth chapter is devoted to the analysis of a local performance artist's play that frames the local perspectives on the neighbourhood with the aim of contesting the dominant public neighbourhood discourses that marginalize Latino men. While doing so, however, the play reaffirms other stereotypes, e.g. the neighbourhood as a dangerous place and therefore as authentically urban.

The sixth chapter investigates neighbour relations in the author's building, a "microcosm of the neighbourhood" [p. 202] with tenants that span the age, class and ethnicity spectrums, divided between limited-equity low income co-op members and market-rate condo tenants and owners. Through the analysis of co-op members' stories Modan unpacks the discourse of family and public/private realms to show how these are used as strategies to include or exclude others – in this case, the condo owners. The chapter is very enlightening and detailed (41 pages: maybe redundant in some parts) in showing how the apartment building dynamics generally fit into the neighbourhood discourse with some exceptions, i.e. the role of gender: the home and family metaphor applied to tenant organizing is indeed an empowering strategy for women who in neighbourhood narratives are depicted, instead, as weak subjects. What is maybe missing in the chapter is the voice of condo owners (we get information about them only through the co-op members' narratives) and ethnographic accounts of interactions in the building (although this might go beyond the author's aims).

This first part of the book, the proper ethnography, is concluded by chapter seven which presents three long extracts from interviews with the author's neighbours; each of them explains how they have been affected by gentrification and what Mt. Pleasant represents for them. This chapter leaves me with a doubt: why are there no comments or analysis? Shouldn't these narratives be analysed as others are in the book?

As mentioned above, the second part of the book is dedicated to the theoretical and intellectual background of research. Chapter eight is a successful effort to theorise the concept of "discourse," despite a surprising omission to mention Michel Foucault's theorization. Chapter nine, instead, is more a list than a theoretical elaboration of con-

cepts. Nevertheless, it constitutes a useful introduction to sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and their intersections with cultural geography and the theorization of place (*à la* Lefebvre).

From a general point of view, I think the book could favourably have taken a more contextual approach in certain areas: sometimes the author does not provide details of where conversations took place or who the interviewed persons are. Furthermore, in some cases as a reader I would have appreciated more accounts coming from field observation to contrast the actors' personal narratives. Given that it is an ethnography of discourse, this would have helped to better understand the different groups' positions.

The issue of urination in the streets, for instance, could have been further developed: it would have been useful to have a description of the situation in which this behaviour takes place (Where does it happen? When? Why?) and particularly to listen to the voice of those people that are marginalized by civic group discourse. This need is to some extent satisfied in chapter five – where a Latino play writer valorises the supposed marginalization landscape against the attacks of gentrifiers – but, still, it is someone who speaks for *them*. Some of the groups in the neighbourhood – the most marginalized – are voiceless, while there is a redundancy of gentrifiers and anti-gentrifiers groups' accounts.

Having said this, I must say that I enjoyed the book very much: in my opinion Modan's account is powerfully effective in unravelling the different ways in which place is related to gender, class and ethnicity and it does this through the analysis of very different materials (conversations, interviews, public documents, theatre plays, etc.). The book provides a good description of identity place construction and the power relations in a diverse and gentrifying neighbourhood. Moreover, the text is well written and it accomplishes the purpose of making ethnography and theory “engaging and accessible to a wide variety of readers” [p. 27]. I would heartily recommend to all those interested in the politics of place, discourses analysis and power relations in the city to read Modan's ethnography. Students and researchers from Italy – where similar empirical works can hardly be found – could find it particular inspiring.

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