

***Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine.* By Tanya Richardson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.**

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Tanya Richardson has produced a fascinating and thought-provoking work. As an ethnography of a particular place, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa* succeeds in showing how spatial geographies can be incorporated into theories of identity. Richardson suggests that questions of *location* may be given priority over questions of *identity* in order to unravel the ways in which concepts of place, history, and the self are mutually constituted. Richardson takes the city of Odessa as her subject for its diverse political and cultural history and for its legacy as a frontier town along multiple borders. Residents describe Odessa as a truly unique place because of its culture, its history, its cosmopolitanism, and all the ways in which it is thought to be ‘un-Ukrainian.’ This sense of uniqueness, Richardson argues, is typical of borderlands and “can be considered [typically] Ukrainian if Ukraine is understood spatially – or territorially – as a multiethnic borderland” (p. 6). Richardson provides detailed, ethnographic vignettes that reveal the presence of contradictory histories and narratives, each hinging upon a continuity of place within Odessa. These personal accounts are placed in juxtaposition with one another in order to reveal how personal identity can be rooted in irreconcilable histories, how coherency can be formed out of the seemingly incoherent.

In chapter one, Richardson lays the theoretical groundwork for her analysis. She aims to disrupt linear constructs of time and history, to ground the past and the present in the performance of place. In her account, place and identity are understood as mutually constituted. She argues that the idea of Odessa as a unique place is produced and reproduced through the engagement of multiple and contradictory histories rooted in the landscape of the city, itself. Richardson borrows the metaphor of a kaleidoscope to illustrate how the multiple, overlapping geographies of Odessa constantly make some things visible and others invisible through a seemingly unlimited series of historical constellations.

Chapters two and three explore the mechanisms of cultural transmission in the context of independent Ukraine’s efforts to build a national identity. Through her rich ethnographic narratives of high school students in history class and of the elderly sharing their life stories, Richardson reveals

how multiple, contradictory histories are passed through kinship and family relations, generating a distinct uncertainty and ambivalence with which young people approach national histories. The life stories of elderly Odessans are based on varied personal experiences colored by privilege, prejudice, and violence throughout their lifetimes. Richardson articulates how these frameworks for viewing the self as a product of such histories may be resistant to new discourses of Ukrainian statehood. Furthermore, though the classroom has been a favorite place to look for the disciplining of national subjects, Richardson argues that textbooks alone cannot explain the success of nationalizing efforts. In the context of multiple historicities, uncertainty about historical narratives undermines the state’s attempt to generate a new understanding of Ukrainian statehood in Odessa.

Chapters four and five address the phenomenological aspects of place in Odessa. Moldovanka, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city, is the subject of chapter four. Richardson illustrates how this area has become a symbol for the city in which it is located through literature, architecture, use of public space, and the designations of high and low culture. Chapter five follows a social group of self-proclaimed historians who make their way through the streets on foot seeking historical relevance in the most mundane structures of the city. Richardson argues that these walking practices allow for the city to be experienced as well as known, forming continuities between historical narratives and notions of Odessan identity.

Finally, Richardson concludes her analysis in chapter six with an exploration into the role that imagined landscapes of cosmopolitanism and provincialism play in situating Odessa within the contexts of nation and empire. Richardson shows how histories are constructed in local museums, historical collections, and city tours highlighting ethnic heritage. Each of these efforts seeks to promote particular histories and obscure others, revealing “the friction encountered when different localities and regions are ‘soldered together’ as part of a nation” (p. 206). Throughout the book, Richardson’s ethnographic narratives provide a rich, complex background for her engagement with Odessa and Ukraine as borderlands. Her argument that history and identity must be considered in

conjunction with place is persuasive, and her presentation of multiple, contradictory historicities in the text illustrates the fundamental interconnectedness of the two.

Richardson's voice in *Kaleidoscopic Odessa* is bold and authoritative. This is, in many ways, a strength of her writing; however, this tone occasionally creates a false sense of detachment between herself and the Odessans captured in her text. The need to contextualize these relationships and her position within them is not always acknowledged. She does speak with affection, for example, about her friend Evgeny, a vendor at the Old Horse Market whom she accompanied to his stall every Saturday (p. 132), but, unfortunately, moments like this are not typical. The story of Richardson's personal involvement is not wholly absent, but the book lacks a level of self-reflexivity that could have

made the text more grounded. A reader who appreciates the beautifully wrought ethnographic material in this book will be left with many unanswered questions about Richardson, herself.

Nevertheless, this book is quite an achievement. Richardson wields an impressive array of social theory, pulling together concepts of history, memory, place and space, hegemony, resistance, and identity, in order to render an analysis that is as illuminating as it is eloquent. Richardson makes a valuable contribution not only to the study of Eastern Europe and Ukraine, but also to ongoing discussions and theoretical debates about history, place, and nationalism. Furthermore, this book would make an excellent offering for university classrooms. It is exemplary not only as an ethnography of history and place but as evidence of the profound ideas that anthropological analysis is capable of producing.