

TRICKS WITH A GLASS: WRITING ETHNICITY IN CANADA

Rocío G. Davis and Rosalía Baena (eds.)
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(by Beatriz Penas Ibáñez. University of Zaragoza)

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This volume is number 46 in the series "Cross/Cultures. Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English", edited by Gordon Collier (Giessen), Hena Maes-Jelinek (Liège), and Geoffrey Davis (Aachen). Davis and Baena (2000) edit a collection of articles on twentieth-century Canadian texts—literary and theoretical—concerned with ethnicity in literature. Among the fifteen co-authors there are a few who participate with more than one contribution to the project—Rocío G. Davis edits, introduces, interviews Wayson Choy and writes a chapter in the book, Rosalía Baena co-edits, writes a chapter and interviews Linda Hutcheon, and finally Eva Darias Beautell writes two chapters in the book.

Being so amply coauthored the work might be expected to show a certain degree of divergence in perspective. But the editors manage to integrate plurality within a unified theoretical frame. The plurality that stems from the diversity—ethnic, generic, cultural, textual and authorial—of phenomena observed meets a horizon of shared understanding of these phenomena in the light of Bakhtinian thought. The most clearly articulated part of Ibarrola's article on Ondaatje's *The English Patient* revolves precisely around the discussion of the polyphonic aspects of the novel.

Another source of cohesion in the volume is the shared assumption that the term 'multiculturalism' and the concepts conveyed by it might be better expressed and reconceptualized under the newer label "interculturalism". This theoretical contrast

is at the basis of the interviews that close the volume. "Intercultural, not Multicultural" is the title of Rocío G. Davis's interview with Wayson Choy, the Chinese-Canadian writer and author of *The Jade Peony*.

The issue of interculturalism is raised by Linda Hutcheon while interviewed by Rosalía Baena. Both Choy and Hutcheon on the one hand and their respective interviewers on the other, take for granted their reader's acquaintance with the more positive connotations raised by the term "interculturalism". It would have been worth discussing each term and in comparing them the derived character of the latter and better term, interculturalism, might have been brought up as an issue.

"Interculturalism" and "intertextuality", in Kristeva's terminology —whose indebtedness to Bakhtin's notion of "dialogism" and "polyphony" should be acknowledged here—, are terms and concepts highly dependent on the more general idea of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity is part of a more philosophical kind of discussion on the subject as placed within a community of shared human experience as well as a culture-specific tradition. It is in the wider philosophical frame of phenomenology that the issue of "oneness vs. otherness" finds adequate expression.

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In more specific sociolinguistic-cultural terms, the problem of "oneness vs. otherness" is tackled by Bakhtinian notions like "monoglossia" and "heteroglossia". These notions can on the one hand contribute to a sound discussion of social diversity, or more relevantly, of socio-ethnic variation and ethnicity, and on the other hand help to explain linguistic and cultural difference in association with systematic differences in social value and symbolic meaning appended to the standard vs. non-standard language varieties and ethnicities.

Furthermore, framing the discussion like this allows the work on ethnic writing to accommodate other relevant factors, such as for instance the discriminatory politics of gender and education that often take place within a complex linguistic and social map and which result in sociocultural asymmetries and patterns of exclusion and domination. Hutcheon points in this political direction when she is invited by Baena to respond to the question of defining "postcolonialism" and she answers by stressing the difference between the postcolonial and the postmodern.

In "Boundary Erasing: Postnational Characterization in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*", Ibarrola prefers the label "postnational" to the more current "postcolonial" for reasons best known to himself. His mention of what is "political" or "apolitical" about Ondaatje is not separated from what is political or apolitical about Ondaatje's characters. This leads Ibarrola to a feeling of mystification when he attempts to explain the ethical, political and aesthetic issues at stake in *The English Patient*.

Ana L. Parejo Vadillo's "Native Women and Resistance Literature" is politically oriented, in the best sense of the word "political". The author is concerned with

the related issues of native women's writing and the ideology of domination. From Althusser's theory of ideology and the state, Ana Parejo builds an explanation of the subjectivity-building and healing functions that speaking and autobiographical writing fulfil especially in complex societies in big countries like Canada.

In her well documented critical review-article on *The Empire Strikes Back* Eva Darias Beutell outlines her criticism of one of the main drawbacks in the work, its "[ignorance of] Canadian writers of origin rather than British" (Darias Beutell 2000: 22). Once she gets over this initial task, the author outlines the conditions to be met by the postcolonial critic: s/he should be an informed reader first and then a reader aware of the need to reconceptualize multiculturalism as transculturalism. Her reader is left to inform herself whether transculturalism is a category different from interculturalism or whether interculturalism fits within a more general encompassing category of transculturalism.

Maria Belén Martín Lucas' chapter, "Interweaving Stories: Genre, Race and Gender at a Cross-Stitch", focuses on tracing the homological relations that link a narrative genre, the short-story cycle, to a set of identity-shaping social conditions —immigration, ethnicity and womanhood— as they are thematized within the narratives of ethnic Canadian women writers. In "Paradigms of Postcolonial and Immigrant Doubleness: Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*" Rocío G. Davis explores in depth the dynamics of the short-story cycle that make it particularly appropriate for the narratives of memory. The hybridity of the narrative form of the short-story cycle matches and stresses the hybridity of the immigrant subject in search of an identity and a lost homeland.

Like Hutcheon and Choy, Janice Kulyk Keefer offers readers a personal account of first-hand experience of what it is like to be a member of an ethnic minority, and an ethnic creative writer of poems and narratives of ethnicity in Canada. Her essay "Personal and Public Records: Story and History in the Narration of Ethnicity" insists on the need for the subject to look back to the narratives of the past in full awareness of history and the voices that inhabit it in marginal as well as central positions. For Janice Kulik Keefer it is critical historical consciousness that ensures the existence of present ethnic-cultural identity.

In a world of globalisation full of promise but also of danger, having diversity theorized on and protected by means of ethically grounded research such as that represented by the present volume is not only desirable but necessary. *Tricks with a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada* is good reading and addresses scholars and students alike. It will be valuable in the teaching of literature courses focusing on women's writing as well as ethnicity. It can also complement language courses with its emphasis on linguistic diversity and the ensuing social conflicts as reflected in and raised by a variety of cultural texts.

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