

## INTRODUCTION

### BORDER ZONES: THE CONTRAPUNTAL VISION

In the last quarter of the 20th century, we have seen the proliferation of spatial metaphors in the field of humanities. Tropes of mobility, crossing, and trespassing have become commonplace to define identities, advance cultural tendencies, and interpret literary texts. For those of us working in the field of cultural and literary studies, terms like diaspora and hybridity have become current in our critical vocabulary. They signal a shift in our approach to the notion of identity, no longer as fixed and immutable but as fluid and changing, and thus bring fresh challenges and new problems of interpretation. One of the most promising areas within this panorama has been opened up by border theories, initially born in the field of Chicano Studies to articulate the condition of cultural doubleness implicit in the production of Chicano artists, critics and writers, and currently used to apply to different forms of identities and texts determined, in one way or another, by transcultural encounters. This issue intends to address the implications of the notion of border as trope in the latter broader context within the North American production of the last years. The various essays explore, and are located in, the physical borders of territories and countries, and the conceptual borders between the postcolonial and the (neo)colonial, the postcolonial and the postmodern, the global and the local, the transnational and the regional, native and diaspora identities. From a wide variety of perspectives, they analyse how the contemporary prominence of those border zones is affecting the cultural and the literary.

One of the common questions that the contributors to this publication unfailingly address is the question of terminology. On a conceptual level, we are living such an unprecedented border crossing between terms and notion that the situation becomes confusing at times. Some critics, for instance, tend to equate terms like 'postcolonial,' 'global,' and 'diaspora.' Although it is fact that these notions certainly overlap, they are not exactly the same. These terms designate different realities and may even point sometimes in opposing directions. The relationships between subjects and their histories are multiple and shifting, but not free of the dimensions of power, of the relationships of domination and subordination (see Frankenberg and Mani 1996). In this context, it would be useful to think of the 'postcolonial' not as a *fait accompli*, but rather as a moment in history and in discourse, constantly redefined by *the borders* with what precedes it (the colonial) and always shadowed by the 'neocolonial.' Such an approach would leave space for the actual potential dimension of the term, since, as James Clifford asserts, the "postcolonial' does describe real, if incomplete, ruptures with past structures of domination, sites of current struggle and imagined futures" (Clifford 1997, 277). Another term that is often used in critical discourse with varying meanings is 'hybridity.' The weakening of the link between culture and place comes unavoid-



ably along a process of interaction between the disembedded cultural practices, and that process creates in turn new complex and hybrid forms of culture. Yet critics should be heedful of the dangers of thinking hybridity in purist terms; that is, as a process of intermingling of two basically pure cultures into a new third product, which is by definition impure. This would only perpetuate the racial prejudices that informed previous theories of cultural purity (see Rosaldo 1989). As Chicano critics and writers have repeatedly explained, hybridity implies a definition of culture as borderland, a fluid space, *always already hybrid in the origin* (Anzaldúa 1987).

These processes open new doors but also create new cultural anxieties as they often reproduce new politics of inclusion and exclusion. A close attention to the issue of positionality, to the position of the specific individual subjects in the specific contexts becomes essential here. Thus, while it is worth pointing out the metaphoric potential of the notion of migrancy to refer to that contemporary phenomenon of movement with no fixed or certain points of departure and arrival, we should not lose track of the dangers of comparisons between migrations enforced by the processes of decolonization and economic globalization and the largely metaphoric journeys of literature and academic thought. "Analogy is risky," Iain Chambers asserts in this context. "There is always the obvious allure of the romantic domestication and intellectual homecoming that the poetic figures of travel and exile promise. Still, it is a risk to be run. For the modern migrations of thought and people are phenomena that are deeply implicated in each other's trajectories and futures" (Chambers 1994, 6). The academic allure of most of these theories lies in the fact that they implicitly reflect the condition of contemporary writing. Our own critical practices are now seen as border writings in many ways. There is a sense of intellectual nomadism, of shifting paradigms of thought. As Chambers writes:

Now that the old house of criticism, historiography and intellectual certitude is in ruins, we all find ourselves on the road. Faced with a loss of roots, and the subsequent weakening in the grammar of 'authenticity', we move into a vaster landscape. Our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as 'origins' or signs of 'authenticity' capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger on as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters. (18-19)

As a result of relatively new critical and theoretical encounters, this volume seems to trace the movement of critical thought into that vaster landscape. The first two articles are theoretical in content and deal in two different ways with the impossibility of stepping out of the structures of binary thought. The opening essay, by David E. Johnson, offers an ambitious and creative approach to the borders of identity and culture in North America. It explores the nature of the subject's locus of enunciation from the point of view of culture and anthropology, and reads the experience of colonial encounters as paradigms of the relationship between the Self and the Other. Those encounters, Johnson argues, are based on the very impossibility for the two subjects involved of understanding each other. They are based, in other words, on a border rhetorics, a constant move towards Otherness. Johnson



begins with two “encounter” anecdotes, one by John Lloyd Stephens in the 19th century and the other by Cristopher Columbus in the late 15th century, which he reads as border experiences. The related events foreground the existence of communities that are not necessarily communities of meaning; they illustrate the possibility of relations without sense, an effect, in the cases Johnson names, of the confusion of languages. Using that possibility of senselessness as a starting point, the author moves to a discussion of the different approaches to identity and otherness in the 20th century that includes the works of Charles Taylor, Terry Eagleton and James Clifford.

Smaro Kamboureli’s “The Culture of Nature and the Logic of Modernity” discusses Sharon Butala’s best-selling autobiographical work *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994) in the context of the contemporary returns to the local that the ongoing globalization has often provoked. Her analysis of the approaches to nature, the local and the regional in Butala’s work unveils the existence of present contradictory impulses to create alternative forms of belonging and to (re)produce the very universal solutions Butala intends to reject. Kamboureli thus illustrates how Butala ultimately fails to produce an effective critique of the institutionalization and commodification of knowledge, a project allegedly at the heart of her book. Instead, she reifies a notion of Nature as attached to the local, against the global, and thus structurally and ideologically dependent on a binary system of thought.

Two other essays are thoroughly engaged with the structures of binarism, by being located on the specific borders between the national and the international, the local and the global. Zhou Xiaojing’s article explores contemporary Asian American poetry with a view on the different ways in which diasporic texts subvert assimilationist narratives of nation, crossing the borders between nations and cultures, and pushing the definition of American literature in unexpected directions. Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s theories of nationalism and his notion of the “in-between spaces” of cultures, Xiaojing offers a close reading of poems by Chinese American, Filipino American, Vietnamese American and Korean American writers to show how these texts unsettle the binary structures on which the nation has traditionally constructed the categories of race, class, gender and culture. Also concerned with the literature of Asian North Americans, Rocío G. Davis addresses the ambiguous role of Chinatown as border zone in Chinese American and Chinese Canadian fiction. Davis’s comparative analyses focuses on the novels’ representation of the space of Chinatown as a site of struggle and negotiation of cross-cultural identities in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* and Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*. In these novels, Davis argues, Chinatown is represented both as physical and as psychological boundary, often connected with a perception of ethnicity as obstacle, rather than as a cross-cultural possibility, in the processes of identity construction.

The essays by Diana Brydon and Heiner Bus provide parallel discussions of the existence of forms of racial belonging vis-à-vis the category of ‘nation’. In “Black Canadas,” Brydon explores the articulation of black Canadian diasporic discourse within, and not against, the national paradigm. The author first offers a critical review of black Canadian literary theorists and writers and then moves to the analysis of specific texts by Lillian Allen, Claire Harris and Dionne Brand. Her discus-

sion of black settler's Canadian literature draws our attention to the limitations of multiculturalism as an official policy that includes blackness just as a piece in the "new" mosaic, but never as part of the "founding cultures" of what we call Canada today. Black Canadian literatures have to negotiate their position within that official discourse as well as in relation to dominant diasporic discourses of blackness coming from the United States, the Caribbean and Britain. "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?" by Heiner Bus also deals with the location of African American writers in a pan-American context. This essay analyses the representation of the Caribbean in selected narrative works by Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and the Jamaican Michelle Cliff, in order to identify a set of common transnational African American elements. Bus's discussion implicitly points out the possibilities as well as the limits of the border as trope for the analysis of African American literature. In their intrinsic hybridity, border zones open up new spaces, but also mark lines, fences, and limits for the articulation of black identities. In search of a more inclusive paradigm for cultural interaction, Bus proposes José Martí's notion of "our America," a utopian project based on an inclusive (re)definition of the Americas as a land of immigration and dislocation, a land of hybrid possibilities as well as of bleeding borders.

Border zones, in their literal, *original*, sense, are the subject of Herrera-Sobek's article on Luis Valdez's video version of "La Pastorela." Drawing on the Foucauldian theories of discourse and heterotopia, this essay intends to show how a popular genre like "La Pastorela," initially designed by the Catholic Church to colonize, contain, and convert the Native American population, can be turned into an effective tool of destabilization of the very ideology that founded it, in the hands of working-class and subaltern groups. Herrera-Sobek's emphasis is on the hybrid nature of these theatrical forms as well as on the possibilities they offer to articulate political and ideological struggles for social justice in contemporary Chicano productions.

Also looking into the potential dimension of hybrid forms of self-representation, this time in the context of Native Canadian fiction, "Towards a Recognition of Being," by Coral Ann Howells, reads Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* as border novels, self-consciously written in the in-between spaces of Native and mainstream cultures. This border condition is shown, Howells notes, at the level of generic choice: Highway's text relates to and rewrites the *Künstlerroman*, while Robinson's engages and revises the narrative quest, a mode which enjoys a rich tradition in Canada. Howells adapts Stuart Hall's articulation of diasporic identities to the Canadian context and locates the two novels as caught in the triangle defined by Native/European/Canadian sites of meaning and interpretation.

The reader will find that the discussions in the different essays often overlap. That will hopefully be the case of my own contribution to this publication, which addresses implicitly or explicitly, most of the issues mentioned. "Traffic Jams Across the Borders" focuses on the connections of border and diaspora theories and deals with the implications of the present conditions of movement, real or metaphorical, for the analysis of contemporary Canadian fiction. I have chosen to look

at selected examples of Indian Canadian fiction because it seems to be paradigmatic of these transformations of the notions of culture and identity in Canada and perhaps beyond.

The interview with Linda Hutcheon takes Marshall McLuhan's definition of Canada as a "borderline case" as a starting point to explore the meaning of different sets of borders in North American literatures and cultures at the turn of the century: there are the physical and cultural borders between Canada and the United States, as well as those within the national spaces, the centers and the peripheries within and between nations. On a more theoretical context, Hutcheon discusses the borders between literary theories and contemporary practices, and those between the postmodern and the postcolonial, between multicultural and diasporic identities, between nation-building and canon formation. The interview recaptures, echoes and enriches most of the issues discussed in the essays, which seem in turn to look forward to the interview and back to their own words in a mirror-like gesture.

Finally, the reader can also find, in the review section, the critical commentaries on two books intimately related to our border zones: the recently published critical works *Writing from the Borderlands* by Carmen Cáliz-Montoro and *Scandalous Bodies* by Smaro Kamboureli. Placed at the end of the volume, these reviews seem to endow the essays in the front with a spatial perspective, and may even give a supplementary dimension to the issues discussed there. The strongest general emphasis has been on how the contemporary processes of (forced or voluntary) deterritorialization are also creating new spaces for belonging. In his article on exile and writing, Edward Said (1984) talks about the "contrapuntal vision" of those who are exiled. Said borrows the term from music, where the *contrappunto* is the technique of combining two or more distinct lines of music that sound simultaneously with an emphasis on melodic, rather than harmonic, progression. Both in an individual form and together as a whole, the essays in this collection seem to provide that contrapuntal vision of the borderlands of North American literatures and cultures at the turn of the century. Since borders are always moving spaces, these essays may also hopefully elicit new itineraries for the future.

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