

BORDER(LANDS)S. CÁLIZ-MONTORO, CARMEN. *Writing from the Borderlands: A Study of Chicano, Afro-Caribbean and Native American Literatures*. Toronto: TSAR, 2000. XIV +181. \$ 21.95

Carmen Cáliz-Montoro describes her *Writing from the Borderlands: A Study of Chicano, Afro-Caribbean and Native Literatures in North America* as “an invitation to revisit the essentials of poetic talk [...], to read between the lines of the literatures of writers from different ethnic, gender, class backgrounds and sexual orientations” (vii). The book, therefore, traces a path into the problematic, though highly attractive, space of the *borderlands* in order to examine the writings produced by a number of authors whose diverse interests are equally marked by the aesthetics of the “[...] limbo and hyphenated realities [...], the space between polarities” (72). The borderland scope gathers here the Chicano poets Gloria Anzaldúa and Alma Luz Villanueva or the performance artist Gillermo Gómez Peña, the Native North American writer and activist Arthur Solomon and the playwright Tomson Highway, the Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writers Dionne Brand, Claire Harris and Marlene Nourbese Philip, the Jewish writer Maurice Blanchot and the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

The borderland is also the space from which the critic can compare and analyse the literary production of all the authors proposed, since it validates the transgression of any definitive cultural and national determination. In this space of negotiation, the writer and the critic approach their positions, since both of them cross the border(s) to inhabit the borderland, trespassing

the borderline to enter the “zone of the psychotic” (71), a ground of multiplicity and continuous difference. The incessant movement from North to South, from Mexico to Canada, from Tibet to the United States intends to avoid “the territorialisation of the topic” (xi). Such an affirmation, nevertheless, is at odds with the structural arrangement of this study, since the division of the book into three parts, “Chicano Literature”, “Caribbean Canadian Literature” and “Literature without Frontiers”, bespeaks a certain tendency to the territorialisation of the axes conforming *Writing from the Borderlands*. This weakness is mended by the apparent lack of analytical borders in the last part. However, the strict separation between parts I and II risks the appreciation of contamination areas between, for example, Nourbese Philip’s work and Native North American rites of initiation and purification, which go undetected here.

Part I, “Chicano Literature”, moves from the cultural and geopolitical characteristics of the Chicano borderland to its articulation in the works of Anzaldúa, Villanueva and Gómez-Peña. As the first chapter, “Defying Otherness: Chicano Geopolitical, Literary and Historical Imprints”, proposes, the border-subject consciousness constitutes the cornerstone of Chicano culture and the mestizo. “What Is in a Poem? Dreams, Myths and Symbols in Gloria Anzaldúa and Alma Villanueva’s Poetry” analyses the textualisation of the mestizo/a in two poems by Anzaldúa, ‘Poets Have Strange Eating Habits’ (1998) and ‘El Sonovabitch’ (1987), and in Villanueva’s ‘Mother, May I?’ (1993) and her story collection *Weeping Woman. La Llorona and Other Stories* (1994). Anzaldúa’s mestizaje



of Catholic and Aztec images and Villanueva's treatment of story telling, locating it at the junction of the personal and the communal, uncover a critical borderland between these Chicana writers and the work of the Native North American Tomson Highway. Highway also represents a rich mixture of traditions, which points out, as Anzaldúa and Villanueva do, the relevance of generating an abiding nexus among community members. Unlike them, performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña focuses on the dismemberment of the traditional community as social formation. Chapter Three, "Performative and Literary Experience: Guillermo Gómez-Peña's New World B/order" examines Peña's new artistic establishment, the 'fourth world' (47), an artistic cosmos featured by the loss of clear-cut identities.

Part II, pushes the analysis further north to examine the borderland inhabited by Caribbean-Canadian women writers. In Canada, as Cáliz-Montoro states, the inclusion of Native and immigrant women writers in the Canadian literary scene has brought to light the inadequacy of prevalent borders and the need to re-map established literary and spatial coordinates (55). Chapter Four, "Displaced Frontiers: A Canadian Geography of Exile", centres its focus on the need to redefine the manichean duality between the wild and the civilised, which perpetuates a "settler-colonial view of Canada" (65). This chapter also interrogates the equation between women and the wild, for being a zone theoretically free from patriarchal constraints, but unable to reflect the new realities presented, for instance, in the 'cross-roads' poetry by Claire Harris, Dionne Brand and Marlene Nourbese Philip.

Chapter Five, "Claire Harris and Dionne Brand" studies Harris's poetry in *The Conception of Winter* (1988), *Drawing down a Daughter* (1992) and *dipped in shadow* (1996), and Brand's *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (1984), *No Language Is Neutral* (1990) and *Bread out of Stone* (1994). Being aware that the English language has distorted black subjectivity, Harris and Brand concentrate their poetic activity on setting language against itself. Both of them resort to story telling for the healing of the individual and com-

munal spirits, which locates part of their production beside Villanueva's or Highway's. The split between this chapter and the next one is based on Harris's and Brand's search for "authenticity within the black self" (91). This illusory search for an original voice supposedly distances them from Philip's investigation of the potentiality of silence. It could be argued, however, that much of this search for a poetic voice can also be found in most of Philip's works. Chapter Six, "Physical Exile and the Exile of Being", a title that could also encompass the literary production of any of the authors included in this work, discusses Philip's *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991) and Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1986). This dual discussion stresses how the official historical discourse has silenced some peoples and condemned some others to the repetition of colonialist patterns. The myths of Narcissus and Echo and the travel of Philip's black female ethnographer have in common the indictment of the historical and mythological discourses for the distorting of self-identity. From the borderland between word, sound and silence, Philip's and Blanchot's poetic works pose a challenge for artistic and historical official constructions.

Part III creates the biggest borderland in undertaking a continuous crossing between Canada and East Asia through the literary production of Elder Arthur Solomon, Tomson Highway and Thich Nhat Hanh. This final part intends to "expose and blur gender, genre and ethnic stereotypes so that the voice of the spirit can speak through" (133). That spirit is the sense of wholeness common to Solomon and Hanh's poetry, the retrieval of the ancestral and transcendental healing attached to Nanabush in Highway's works. The discussion here includes tangentially the works of Lee Maracle, Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culleton. Chapter Seven, "Spirit Voices in some North American Native Writers" analyses how the power of story telling is perceived as a soothing balm able to transform bitterness into calmness. Solomon's *Eating Bitterness: A Vision beyond the Prison Walls* (1994), and the plays *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1988), by Highway, emblematises the power of story



telling as healing, which erases the border with the eighth chapter. "The Art of Living: Thich Nhat Hanh's *Heart of Understanding*" uses Hanh's 1988 work as pretext to recapitulate many of the ideas already posed. This section, also an epilogue (XIII), intends to cross the path between Buddhism and the Native North American philosophies of existence; Highway, Solomon, Hanh and the philosopher Anagarika Govinda.

The border consciousness exhibited by this last chapter relates all the authors discussed and (dis)locates them in a territory of identities in progress and blurred frontiers, from which they all manifest a common interest in the renewal of poetic expression and the re-conceptualisation of their subjectivities. Such a process is infused by the inconclusive character of the formation

of identities and knowledge within a paradigm of hybridity, which proves essential to counteract given and constraining notions of nation, class, culture, sexuality and/or gender. Fortunately, the diving into the borderlands of North American cultures is becoming fundamental in any thorough analysis of the contemporary panorama of writing. The study of cultural borderlands in North America and beyond entertains an enormous potential of literary creativity, and confirms that "theories [have to be] expanded in order to enclose the middle ground and acknowledge the deep interdependence of the extremes" . Otherwise, "we are once more reproducing and perpetuating distorted mental formations" (70).

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