



SILENCE, WHISPER AND SOUND: TEXTUAL SUBJECTIVITIES REVISED. Eva Darias Beautell and María Jesús Hernández Lerena, eds. *Canon Disorders: Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States*. Logroño: Universidad de La Rioja/Universidad de La Laguna. Servicio de Publicaciones, 2007. 186 pp.

At this, the beginning of the 21st century, it is difficult to discuss any theoretical aspect of literature, cultural studies or philosophy which does not include questions of “canon” and “gender”. These two key concepts of contemporary critical theory have been at the center of the debate for so long that we might run the risk of taking them for granted. Books such as *Canon Disorders: Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States* are welcome, therefore, as reminders that we must continually keep rethinking and revising cultural production. It should also be pointed out that one of the apparently obvious, yet somehow innovative aspects of Darias Beautell and Hernández Lerena’s book is that it deals with literature and film production both in Canada and the United States, an unusual proposal in hegemonic canons.

One of the contributors to this book says in her essay that “the voice excluded from the canon can barely whisper, cannot make enough sound to enter a textual space” (van Herk, 41). Indeed, in the last decades of the 20th century, the postmodern demand for revision of the canon created an interest in many texts, long forgotten or excluded, which were suddenly given a voice, becoming objects of study in Academia. But, as Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg stated in the introduction to their *Cultural Studies*¹, which they edited in 1992, many questions have to be asked when dealing with the canon, such as who decides, or who has power

to decide; and to this they added that “it is not only the content of the selection that must be examined—who ends up in the canon—the syllabus—the conference—the book— history. It is also the constitution and consequences of selection, by progressive as well as by conservative forces” (13) that have to be questioned. These editors were dealing with cultural studies, but their idea that this discipline “must constantly interrogate its own connection to contemporary relations of power, its own stakes” (13) can be applied to any other academic field.

In fact, the history of feminist criticism is a good example of how the relationship between a discipline and power has been reflected upon. As the editors of *Canon Disorders* say in the introduction to their book, feminist scholarship, both in Canada and the United States, has been crucial in bringing to the foreground “the complex relationship between canon and power” (11). In addition, the obvious shift from the margin to the center which feminism has undergone has forced many scholars, once they have also been empowered within Academia, to rethink their work. This is not the place to discuss a concept such as “gender”, yet it should be pointed out that the editors of the book state that the essays included in this edition “define gender in the most encompassing sense, which would include traditional (white and middle class) feminist analyses, queer theory as well as studies of masculinities” (p.13). The book presents us with seven essays which, in the words of its editors “mark the persistence of old sites of struggle within gender studies and point to the existence of new ones” (16). Different perspectives, differing angles: an apparent disorder of the canon they are constructing.

Aritha van Herk’s essay, “Hanging out the Laundry: Heroines in the Midst of Dirt and Cleanliness” uses laundry as a metaphor to discuss the feminist construction of the canon, showing how the emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene, as opposed to dirt and filth, pervaded early selections of texts. She states that “in attacking and revising the established canon”, feminism “inadvertently” canonized “the middle-class heroine” (23), and ended up enforcing conformity (26). She analyzes two films, two

¹ Cary Nelson, Paula A., Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction”. *Cultural Studies*, Ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1992) 1-22.

novels, a short story collection and a memoir, all from different nations, but with one thing in common: female characters who are involved in domestic labor, and to be more precise, in laundry work. Hers is an invitation to construct a renovated literary canon where “human frailty and filth” (43) are included, so that the “impregnable canon-fortress” (42) can be invaded.

In “Blood Road Leads to Promise: A Gendered Approach to Canada’s Past in Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning*”, Eva Darias Beautell analyzes this Canadian novel from an ecofeminist perspective, focusing on the relationship between women and the environment. Thus, she shows how the foundational myths of Canada are revised, how the “patriarchal and ethnocentric pillars” of the Canadian pioneer period are dismantled (49) in a novel which denounces gender violence together with the colonization and acculturation of Aboriginal culture. According to Darias Beautell, the revision of the relationship between wilderness and gender, which belongs to a long tradition in Canadian literature, also takes place in this novel. The search for alternative ways of relating gender and the environment is clear in a text where gender and culture become determining factors “of plot structure, of narrative pace and teleology as well as of the novel’s resolution” (50).

María Jesús Hernández Lerena also analyzes a Canadian novel, Douglas Glover’s *Elle* (2003), attempting an exploration of to what extent contemporary criticism has become interwoven with the writing and reception of the text. Her essay, “Surviving the Metaphorical Condition in *Elle*: Douglas Glover’s Impersonation of the First French Female in Canada”, shows how the sixteenth-century female protagonist of the novel, Marguerite de Roberval, is constructed following feminist and postcolonial theories “of male hegemony and of European imperialism” (71). Thus, this legendary figure becomes, in the novel, a metaphor for the colonization of the nation, as well as for the relationship between women and the wilderness. Hernández Lerena contends that the endowment of the heroine with contemporary critical vocabulary turns the story into an essay where “critical discussion of post-

colonial and gender issues” becomes the main aspect of the narration (78). Although the author analyzes the obvious use of parody in Glover’s novel, she considers the text disturbing as a reading experience, as “it does not allow the reader to conclude which of the two voices (tragic or comic) one has to respond to primarily” (86). Hernández Lerena comes to the conclusion that the novel shows the inability of language to convey experience, while contributing to the feminist project in expanding the protagonist’s “potentiality as hero” (87-88). In fact, the idea that the novel shows the two dimensions of Marguerite de Roberval, both as the cultural artefact, “elle”, and also as a woman, points to the feminist contention that after postmodernism, contradictions have to be shown, and also taken advantage of.

In “Representing Hegemonic Masculinity: Epistemology and the Performance of Male Identity in Documentary Film”, Vicente R. Rosselló Hernández takes the gendered perspective which for a long time remained an unmarked category in gender studies: masculinity. His essay also endeavours to fill a gap in the analyses of gender in Film Studies, in which many fiction films have been objects of study, but rather fewer documentaries, despite the author’s opinion that documentary “provides a particularly fertile ground for analyses of cultural portrayals of gender identity” (94). After giving an account of the most contemporary theoretical work on gender—with the emphasis on masculinity studies—and carrying out a survey of the most important views regarding representation in documentary studies, Rosselló Hernández devotes the last part of his essay to analyzing the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity in three documentary films, all by white male directors. His objective is to show how the kinds of masculinity constructed in the three documentaries are “ideologically-charged performative iterations of gender” (94) and, furthermore, how the texts become “powerful illustrations of the particular zones of anxiety, liminality and tension” that contribute to the instability of gender as a category (95). This essay is critical of the risks we may run in thoughtlessly embracing more contemporary and provocative theo-

ries, and reminds us of the amount of work which remains to be done in the field of gender studies. Thus, the author warns us of the danger that assumptions about gender and sexual identity, such as the ones exposed by queer theory, may eventually lead to an “unquestioning and vague celebration” of the subversive possibilities of discontinuous, fractured, or fluid subjectivities, “with rather less notice given to the practical everyday effects of the heteronormative gender order and the need for more sustained, organised forms of resistance” (96). The analysis of the representation of normative masculinity that Rosselló Hernández undertakes in this essay is more than justified, and his contention that the representation of this kind of masculinity “is always already ubiquitous”, but has been for a long time “paradoxically, transparent, unmarked” (102), is exemplified through the presentation of these three documentaries, described as “hyperbolic instantiations of hegemonic masculinity” (115).

The intention of Dulce María Rodríguez González in her contribution to this book is to dismantle the hegemonic traditional Freudian couples, in which the relationships between mothers and sons, or fathers and daughters were examined, but the bonds between mothers and daughters remained absent. In “The Dismantling of the Oedipal Dyad in Two American Women Poets: The Dynamics of Maternal Desire”, Rodríguez González analyzes two poems, one by Anne Sexton, the other by Alicia Ostriker, showing how the mother-daughter dyad may result, as in the words of Luce Irigaray, in a “highly explosive nucleus” (120), one worthy of study by feminist criticism when attempting to question the patriarchal order. The author turns to the work of Nancy Chodorow and Jacques Lacan in order to analyze the importance of mother-daughter relationships in the two poems. She shows how both the need to identify with the mother, and the impulse of separation are present in the texts written by these two women poets. Rodríguez González’s analysis shows how the Freudian absence can finally be restored, and her essay offers an example of the impact which the connection between psychoanalysis and literature had on gender studies.

In “‘Too Bad Mihijita Was Morena’: Anzaldúa’s Autobiographical Encounters with Her Mother”, María Henríquez Betancor analyzes Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La frontera* as a “gendered cultural autobiography” (144), focusing especially on the problematic relationship between Anzaldúa and her mother as one of the most significant borderlands in the life of this Chicana writer. Before beginning her analysis of Anzaldúa’s text, Henríquez Betancor gives an account of the contribution of Chicana writers to the field of autobiography because, in her opinion, since the 1980s the autobiographical texts produced by these writers were a challenge to what was then considered canonical autobiography. *Borderlands/La frontera* (1987) would therefore become an example of how what was understood as autobiography in the 1980s was questioned by Anzaldúa in a text which transgressed many of the expected norms by writing from a working-class Chicana lesbian perspective or revealing the conflicts in her relationship with her mother in a community where “the mother figure has been dearly sublimed” (147). The impulse to reject the gender roles imposed by her culture made Anzaldúa search for a different model of motherhood, and she found it in their religious icons. Thus, Coatlicue, the goddess who symbolizes power and resistance in pre-Hispanic Mexico becomes the empowering figure for Anzaldúa, helping her to recuperate who she is “in the borderlands of race, class, and gender” (157).

Mladen Kurajica’s, “*Ganzfeld* or the Ontology of Escape in Robert Kroetsch’s *The Hornbooks of Rita K*” is a reflection on the idea of vanished identities which we are witnessing at the outset of the 21st century. Kroetsch’s female character, a woman who has chosen to disappear and thus falls into silence, gives way to Kurajica’s analysis of a novel in which “the representation of subjectivity” is at stake (163). He follows Deleuze and Guattari in their defence of “intuition, experiment, and rupture”, in “their understanding of subjectivity as a never-determined set of multiplicities” (163), and in their idea of the rhizome, which allows subjects to become the one and the other, the male and the female. According to Kurajica, it is in terms of the rhizome that we can understand Rita and



her decision “to deterritorialize herself from the limitations imposed by language” (180). He has chosen a novel where language is constantly questioned, where the female (vanished) protagonist has stated that words are “lock, not a key” (162), and he wonders in his essay whether there could be “a poetics of silence, instead of language” (162). That, in his opinion, would be the way out proposed by Kroetsch in order to escape the postmodern paradox of having to use language in order to defy it: silence as the way to escape the “logic which always defines us in terms of binary beings” (169).

The emphasis on silence as a liberating idea in the last essay of this book may be seen in paradoxical contrast to the statement made in the first essay about whispers and excluded voices which cannot make enough sound to enter a textual space. Sound/silence: we find ourselves trapped in binary oppositions again, and we may be wondering which road to take. Whatever the answer we choose, this book has made us reflect upon many of the aspects concerning the canon and gender studies in the past decades. The edi-

tors, as canon-makers themselves, have decided to show the disorder of a canon in which the more traditional and the more innovative perspectives on gender are exposed. *Canon Disorders* offers, therefore, a varied selection of approaches, and whether the focus is on women, masculinities, working-class heroines, daughters, men, mothers, talking characters, fathers, femininities, or silent characters, what is clear is that it forces us to continue to rethink and revise the construction of subjectivities in literature and film. Perhaps both sound *and* silence, following Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomes, can be embraced. Perhaps we should simply be aware, as one of the contributors of the book warns us, of the risks taken in failing to ask questions, and in celebrating one approach over the other (Rosselló, 96). On reading this book, one has the impression that no voice should be excluded from the canon; for as we have seen, even that which has decided to remain silent has something important to tell.

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