

**Elizabeth Woodward Smith. ed. 2007: *Approaching Cultures through English*. A Coruña: Universidade da Coruña. 394 pp.**

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## **1. Introduction**

Although the expression *Cultural Studies* has been avoided in the *Foreword*, the reader will perceive the volume gets its main inspiration from this multidisciplinary approach to cultural manifestations. Starting in Britain, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a new discipline for which Richard Hoggart coined the term *Cultural Studies*. Stuart Hall's pioneer work, followed by that of other colleagues, contributed greatly to the development of Marxist readings of cultural artefacts based on the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony' (Turner 2002). An international community of 'resistant' intellectuals was then gradually formed by researchers from different backgrounds with a focal interest in the products of culture. They examined high as well as popular manifestations, and interpreted literary, film and other media discursive practices as cultural phenomena either supporting or opposing hegemonic power.

As its influence has spread, the 'cultural turn' has been highly contested. Harsh criticism by Harold Bloom (1994) is well-known and responds mainly to the replacement of canonical works as objects of study by the 'by-products' of a hybrid, multiethnic society that would work against a Western cultural tradition. Nonetheless, researchers in *Cultural Studies* have continued to seek connections among different fields of knowledge within a postmodern framework of reference as proved by recent publications (Gigi Durham and Kellner 2001; Walton and Scheu 2002).

In *Approaching Cultures Through English* the voices of the different authors diverge and agree on the methods adopted to deal with a variety of cultural products. However, the multiple perspectives from which topics are analysed also allow readers to get new insights and fully grasp the composite and contradictory nature of the cultures that derive from English-speaking communities. Indeed, 'multiculturalism' and 'interculturality' are frequently mentioned as key notions in many essays. Accordingly, the volume edited by Woodward Smith brings together contributions mostly by Spanish researchers, but it is enriched by the international scope of authors from Hungary, Russia, Jordan, India, and the USA. Likewise, the reader will find a wide range of topics, including classical and contemporary literature written in English but also essays which deal with mass-media products like film and music. In addition, historical and anthropological accounts of cultural phenomena and the teaching of English as a foreign language are touched upon. All of these issues are approached in turn from the perspective of diverse postmodern theories, mainly postcolonial, subaltern and feminist ones, which interpret self and national identities as well as the values derived from them within the multifarious contexts where English is present.

The essays are presented in alphabetical order by author levelling thus all papers in terms of conceptual depth and originality, which perhaps is not completely fair. This uncommitted arrangement is far from illuminating and the volume would have benefited from the inclusion of descriptive headings conveying a precise idea of the essential issues and debates at stake. The assertion that culture, language and identity cannot be dealt with in isolation is a common belief among all authors. However, for the sake of clarity I will attempt to identify thematic sections more clearly and draw connections where theoretical approaches overlap.

## **2. Teaching Languages and Culture**

A substantial number of contributions insist on the cross-cultural dimension of the teaching of languages. The need to include culture as part of the language curricula in foreign language teaching and increasing learners' responsiveness to cultural diversity is a common claim. The study carried out in Jordan by Al-Abed Al-Haq, Baniabdelrahman and Shatnawi (1-16) reveals a lack of cultural awareness on the part of textbook writers who only refer to Western habits and traditions instead of adapting cultural contents to the requirements of their prospective learners. Arroyo Vázquez (41-48) suggests resources to increase students' knowledge of the history moulding contemporary America as a multicultural reality. A more original corpus of materials is suggested by Dachs Ventura (93-101), who selects South-African tales by Dianne Steward to raise awareness of cultural diversity and linguistic variety in the classroom. Eynullaeva (121-30) highlights the need to bridge intercultural communication gaps and underlines the importance of borrowing as a useful strategy. Lojo Sandino (227-34) illustrates that bilingualism in minority language communities like the Irish-speaking one in Ireland is always an advantage in foreign language learning. Finally, an unusual, yet original, pedagogical proposal derives from Proux-García's essay (307-15), which recommends exploiting epistolary texts and exemplifies this possibility through the correspondence of Sand and Byron.

## **3. Intercultural Links or the History of Migration and Travelling**

The process of cultural assimilation, the existence of divergent cultural values, and a multicultural heritage are considered as a consequence of the exchange between different cultural groups and English-speaking communities. Thus, Amenedo Costa (25-31) analyses one of the sources of British immigration to Galicia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and relates the presence of foreigners in Ferrol to the Bourbon policy of naval reform. The author resorts to documentary evidence to illustrate the changing economic situation of British migrants during a period that saw shifts in Spain's political associations with other European nations. Nadales Ruiz (263-70) pays homage to Augusto Assía, a Galician correspondent in Britain, for bridging the cultural gap between both communities through his newspaper articles collected in *Los ingleses en su isla*. However, perhaps due to the time elapsed some excerpts Nadales chooses seem to reinforce some British stereotypes.

Ribas Segura (317-24) offers a general account of the Southern-European heritage in Australia owing to the migratory wave of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After dealing with the economic and political roots of Spanish emigration to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, she identifies important locations of the Spanish cultural legacy in that territory.

#### **4. Anthropological Dimensions of Culture: Traditions, Time, Religion, Nature, Science and Music**

In this volume there is an obvious attempt to convey the idea that culture goes beyond the scope of literary criticism and linguistic enquiry. As a result, a wider anthropological dimension of culture arises. The conflicting notions of nature, time and religion, among others, are discussed as seen in different contexts and historical moments by Caridad Barreiro, Rouse, Serén Bouzas, and Valera Tembra. Rouse's essay (335-48) deserves special comment, since it makes available a remarkable analysis of the evolution of the concept of 'time' in England. The author considers the reasons for expanding 'clock-time' use as opposed to 'natural time', and provides an interesting reflection on the new concept of 'flexi-time', all of which, argues the author, depends on socio-economic factors and the kind of activity people engage in. Rouse lucidly illustrates his point via several English folksongs and poems.

Other authors explore the complexities of eighteenth-century Britain. Caridad Barreiro (69-77) examines the emergence of new values associated with Nature during the Enlightenment and how this conceptual transformation justifies an increase in outdoor leisure activity since then. Crespo García's essay (87-92) deals with the evolution of science and its impact in Britain since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, drawing conclusions for the understanding of science two centuries later.

As for the religious aspects, Serén Bouzas (359-66) provides an interesting account of Celtic religion while Valera Tembra (367-72) looks into the evolution of Catholicism in New Zealand. Closely related is the overview of well-known dates and festivities in the British, Irish and USA calendars traced by Sagredo Santos (349-58). While stressing their cultural specificity she also mentions the assimilation of such cultural manifestations in non-English speaking communities as a result of globalisation. It should be said that the addition of yet 'untried' customs and traditions from other English-dominated areas would have added an extra-value to the essay.

#### **5. Culture through Legal and Ancient Texts**

Vázquez Maroño (373-83) and Jazaro Álvarez (181-96) provide valuable analyses for those unfamiliar with the disciplines of Forensic Linguistics and Palaeography. Vázquez Maroño remarks the poor development of Forensic Linguistics in Roman Law countries as compared to Common Law ones. Jazaro Álvarez, in his turn, aptly revises the earliest sources of the legend of Merlin and focuses on the *Black Book of Cammarthen*. The transformation of the different legends of Merlin and his disputed national origin is better understood once basic notions in Palaeography have been explained.

## 6. Literatures in English and the Expression of Identity

Gender and the conflicts arising from mixed and intercultural concepts of national and self-identity are the main issues undertaken when dealing with literary texts. At the crossroads between gender and literature we find several contributions. Lasa Álvarez (197-205) focuses on women writers looking for literary patronage at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through Sarah Greene's satirical novel *Romance Readers and Romance Writers*. Eighteenth century orientalism, as theorised by Edward Said and contested by Reina Lewis, is the starting point for an essay by Núñez Puente (279-88) where Aphra Behn's and Frances Sheridan's treatment of Eastern women comes to the fore. Working on two different hypotheses, the author delves consistently into beauty, sexuality, marriage, power and agency as treated in *Oroonoko* and *Nourjahad* respectively to conclude that women writers of the period conceive of female roles in equally patriarchal terms. Fernández Rodríguez (139-48) also concentrates on the position of the female as artist in Burney's *The Wanderer*.

Keen on tackling gender issues from a postcolonial perspective is Fernández Méndez (131-38) who analyses Stevenson's subversion of the imperial romance in *The Beach of Falesá*, a realistic novel which, according to the author, defies the exotic depiction of transcultural relationships. On the other hand, Armental Romero (139-48) resorts to psychoanalytic feminism to examine father-daughter relationships in Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*, covering thus contemporary Australian writing. Bringas López (49-58) examines how novelist Cristina García reflects on exile and the split identity of Cuban-American women. By appropriating the trope of mother/land from a Caribbean feminist perspective, argues Bringas, García advocates "the need for reconciliation with the homeland and the impossibility of renouncing one's cultural legacy" (56). Similarly, Lojo Rodríguez (217-26), supporting her statements on a well-known corpus of feminist criticism (Butler 1990; Gilbert and Gubar 1979) deals with Eavan Boland's poetic strategy of female empowerment based on her rejection of male iconography and foregrounding representations of motherhood and bodily functions.

Other papers touch upon the poetic expression of Irish national identity. Ledo Fernández (207-16) examines Kavanagh's myths as compared to those of Yeats and Heaney. Similarly, the poetic construction of Irish individuality by Seamus Heaney is the concern of several authors: Losada Pérez (235-42) concentrates on Heaney's early poetry, while De Toro Santos and Alonso Giráldez (103-10) compare Heaney's strategy based on place names to George Watson's, and vindicate in the former a conscientious effort to mark the difference of Irishness even if writing in English. Heaney's 'sense of place' is mentioned as fundamental in both papers, although the notion consistently reappears in many other essays on postcolonial writing. Montero Armenteiro (253-62) carries out a neat analysis of Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen's use of the Big House as a symbol of Ascendancy. The author identifies the motif mainly in her poetry but also traces it in Bowen's novels.

At the interface between language and literature Paul Kumar (289-300) examines cultural diversity in India in one of the most enjoyable essays in the volume. The author revises the effects of British cultural hegemony in India and

the intercultural character of its best writers, mentioning Salman Rushdie's code-switching as a case in point. Paul Kumar also touches upon the emergence of a kaleidoscopic literary culture in the languages of India.

The mixed identity of Chicana writers is Álvarez Calleja's (17-24) primary concern. Relying on Foucault and Derrida and covering a wide range of Mexican-American authors, Álvarez offers a lucid analysis of the 'borderland' and the 'sense of place' as necessary categories for a suitable interpretation of this type of literature. Naya Montero (271-77) also insists on the issue of fragmented identity but now as a result of diaspora by examining short stories by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Pedraza López (301-306) deals with South African novelist Gordimer, focusing on the interpretation of *July's Village*. The negotiation of identity is also the central issue in Rosende Pérez's essay (325-34) on Irish writer Éilís Ní Dhuibhne.

Two authors prove especially persuasive in revealing the political and ideological dimension of anthologising. Lefevere critically systematised in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992) how anthologising and translating manipulate literary texts to ideological and artistic ends so that the resulting products can be given a new, sometimes subversive, historical or literary status. This premise, mainly applied in *Translation Studies*, seems suitable here to appreciate the role ideology plays in the making of cultural products. Neither Brito Marrero (59-68) nor Martín González (243-51) explicitly acknowledge Lefevere's influence but both share the assumption that there is always manipulation in the selection and arrangement of materials in anthologies. In an enlightening essay, Brito Marrero thus explores the reasons underlying the publishers' promotion of a new American multicultural identity in recent anthologies of postmodern poetry: *An Ear to the Ground* (1989), *American Identities* (1994) and *Unsettling America* (1994). On the other hand, Martín González details the attempts to overcome the traditional dichotomy established in the United States between women "poets of experience" and "experimental writers" (246). She concludes that at least some anthologies like *Poetry from Sojourner: A Feminist Anthology* (2004), have "done away with the divide between feminist and innovative poetry" (249), although the separation between those two kinds of poetry is still operative.

Despite the preference for contemporary forms of culture Shakespeare remains an inevitable source of inspiration in this volume. Couto Lorenzo (79-85) identifies diverging interpretations of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* by focusing on Shylock in movies by Trevor Nunn and Michael Radford respectively. Domínguez Moreno and Carrasco Carrasco (111-20) distinguish Shakespearean traces in science-fiction. Comparing Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and *The Tempest*, they claim, Shakespearean themes are used to criticise the US socio-political panorama in the 1950s.

## 7. Film and Cultural Stereotypes

The (de)construction of stereotypical images in motion pictures is also a central issue in this collective volume as several contributors have paid attention to how film discursive strategies serve particular ideological aims. Applying the poststructuralist theories of Irigaray and Braidotti to James L. Brooks's film *Spanglish* (2004) Filgueira Figueira and Moreno Álvarez (149-56) offer one of

the most interesting and methodologically consistent essays. Their exploration of the social construction of gender and cultural identity in present-day America is based on the analysis of voices and identities in Los Angeles, where neither the Mexican nor WASP discourse is hegemonic. Self-definition is gradually achieved, according to the authors, through a strategic use of feminine tropes: eating, sewing and fluids.

Hall's notion of "representation" as a "process by which members of a culture use language ... to produce meaning" (2002: 61) is implicit in film criticism. Accordingly, Iglesias Díaz (173-80) assumes the concept of nation as a narrative construction, be it literary or cinematographic. While the first has served the purpose until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, argues the author, film narratives "have taken over since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (173). With *Trainspotting* (1996) Iglesias provides a convincing case in point of an 'alter/native' narrative that foregrounds the conventions of representation "underlining the fact that we are in the presence of a *re-creation* of the world outside, and as such, subjective and open to change" (174). Iglesias argues that the devices employed by Boyle to translate Welsh's novel, i.e., the use of non-standard English, an unromantic Scottish setting, an unreliable narrator, a fragmented narrative voice, and elements of magic realism, allow the director to create alternative national spaces. In his turn, Floyd Moore (157-66) asserts no subordinating position for films as compared to literary texts. Focusing on the cinematographic version of Greene's *The Third Man* (1949) he concludes the film is utterly packed with stereotypical images of American and European characters. The paradoxical elements in the film and the existence of a shortened American version of it derive, according to Floyd Moore, from constructions of American character that otherwise would have been unacceptable. On the other hand, British stereotypes in *The Ladykillers* (1955) are revisited from a socio-political perspective by editor Woodward Smith (383-94).

## 8. Global Assessment

I would like to conclude by summarising the most salient features of the book as well as the reasons for commending it. In the first place, I am persuaded this interdisciplinary collection of essays will be welcomed by researchers keen on pursuing inter-cultural as well as cultural studies. The publication brings forward the healthy condition of intercultural investigation in Spanish universities as well as the incontestable drive of English Studies in that context.

This book also demonstrates that the plurality of perspectives adopted by the individual authors enhances the understanding of an English-speaking heterogeneous cultural reality. The academic quality of *Approaching Cultures through English* is indisputable. Only a few authors opt for already familiar proposals on teaching methodology (for example, Arroyo Vázquez [41-48]); or fail to express what hides underneath a merely descriptive stance on fascinating aspects of culture (Heavner [167-72]; Ribas Segura [317-24]). Otherwise, the insightful perspectives from which researchers address the most controversial issues of cultural diversity, hegemony and power are well catered for in this new collective volume.

I would like to congratulate Woodward for this editorial initiative which proves the existence of a solid community of researchers interested in “approaching cultures through English”.

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