

CAROLINE DE WAGTER, *“Mouths on Fire with Songs:” Negotiating Multi-Ethnic Identities on the Contemporary North American Stage*, Cross/Cultures: Readings in Post/Colonial Literatures and Cultures in English, Vol. 163 (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2013), 356 pp.

The present study takes its starting point from the observation that “in spite of flourishing theatrical activity across the North American stage, ethnic and indigenous dramatic productions continue to be neglected by scholarship” (xiv). Although there has been an ever increasing output of critical studies in that field over the past decades, De Wagter’s book represents a pioneering effort both with regard to its large scope and wealth of material and its methodological approach. Taking a cross-national and cross-ethnic comparative perspective, the study analyzes a corpus of twenty-five plays by sixteen different Canadian and U.S.-American playwrights of diverse (indigenous, African, and Asian/South Asian) and often mixed ethnic backgrounds. The approach is based on the assumption that in spite of their great differences, all these plays and their authors “share typical markers of postcoloniality” (xv) and thus also share a common agenda: the deconstruction of the binary conceptions imposed by the colonialist discourse systems of ‘white’ Western culture. The theoretical foundation of the study is provided by the paradigm of postcolonial studies, a paradigm that replaces the (essentialist) multicultural model of basically static and fixed cultural identities with the more flexible and dynamic notion of identity construction as an ever-continuing process of change and ‘hybridization’, while at the same time stressing the ‘oppositional,’ ‘subversive,’ or ‘transgressive’ (etc.) potential of that process.

The study is divided into an introduction, four main chapters and a conclusion. The introduction provides the reader with a detailed and systematic exposition. Locating its own project within the contexts of the existing scholarly efforts relevant to the field, the study continues with a short but concise characterization of the historical origins and ideological implications of the American Dream and the idea of multiculturalism as the national founding myths of the United States and Canada respectively. This is followed by an equally concise overview of the multi-ethnic theater scene in both countries that stresses

the close interrelationship between the social changes effected by the dynamics of immigration on the one hand and the development of a multi-ethnic theater on the other.

Reflecting on the terminology used in the study, the introduction furthermore discusses the problematic ideological implications of such terms as ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘melting pot,’ or ‘mosaic,’ adopting here the critical position and terminology of Stuart Hall who offers the term “multi-ethnic” as a concept “more appropriate to describe inter- and cross-national differences” (xxxvii). The criteria for inclusion or exclusion of research material are explained under the heading “Scope and Corpus” (xxxvii-xlii). While the period covered by the choice of plays and authors—between the early nineteen-seventies and the beginning of the twenty-first century—is an adequate reflection of the increasing presence and importance of multi-ethnic theater in North America, the exclusion of the rich and diverse scene of Latino theater and the restriction to play-scripts written and/or published in English (which in some cases are complemented by helpful references to actual performances) are plausibly explained by practical necessities.

The central part of the introduction is the subchapter on the “Theoretical Framework” (xxxviii-xlii). This subchapter demonstrates a profound knowledge of postcolonial theory and related contexts. It foregrounds in particular W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of ‘double consciousness,’ Frantz Fanon’s theory of linguistic colonization, Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of postcolonial resistance in terms of strategic mimicry and hybridization, Stuart Hall’s concepts of diasporic identity and ethnicity, and Benedict Anderson’s theory of nations as ‘imagined communities,’ always paying attention to the conceptual linkages between these different theoretical positions as well as to the continuities between the precursors DuBois and Fanon and postcolonial theorists today. The declared aim is to develop a flexible methodology that “avoids closure” (xlvi) and seeks to avoid the pitfalls of binary or essentialist thinking and of racial or ethnic homogenization. Preceded by an outline of the following chapters (“Thematic Structure,” lxiii-lxv), the introduction closes with a (self-)reflection on the author’s own “positionality” as a “‘white’ European scholar” (lxvi), reminding the reader, among others, that the “concept of ‘whiteness’ requires more fluidifying, too” (lxvi). However, as I will address later, this postulate

remains a bit abstract and is more or less disregarded in the further course of the study.

In the four main chapters, the material is organized under the following thematic issues: “Staging Hybridity,” with concepts such as ‘in-betweenness,’ ‘racial madness,’ and ‘diaspora’ as lead categories (chapter one), “Shattering the North American Dream,” with focus on plays that challenge the concepts of either the American Dream or Canadian multiculturalism (chapter two), “Cultural Memory,” discussing (with Pierre Nora’s ‘lieux de mémoire’ and Harry Elam’s ‘(w)righting history’ as lead categories) subversive re-constructions of colonialist history (chapter three), and “Performing Imagined Communities,” dealing in the first part with subversive re-appropriations of racist stereotypes by nonwhite authors and in the second with two documentary plays which project visions of “imagined communities” among non-white people of diverse backgrounds (chapter four).

In a strategic methodological application of Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, rather than structuring the material along the lines of national, ethnic, or gender categorizations, each chapter is organized as a systematic mixture of voices from diverse backgrounds and thus stages a continuous dialogue between those different voices, enabling fruitful comparisons between them. In each chapter, the selection of ‘case studies’ is introduced by substantial expository remarks and complemented with detailed relevant autobiographical background information. In the individual case studies, the approach is a combination of highly intensive close reading and extensive historical and cultural contextualization. That way, the study also fulfills an important mediating function within the larger context of intercultural communication across the Atlantic. Moreover, these analyses are interspersed with a dense network of cross-references to other works, other contexts, or diverse intertextual or intercultural connections. This method of presentation functions not only as a welcome counterpoint to the case studies approach but also helps to shape the diversity of the material into a kind of ‘imaginative [textual] community.’ Throughout, the discussion is based on a careful consideration of relevant secondary material. The concluding chapter, in addition to providing a comprehensive summary, also marks several points of departure from which future studies could open up possible new areas of research. A valuable

source for further research is also provided by the extensive bibliography at the end, which is complemented by a helpful index.

A few aspects of the study provoke critical comments. These concern primarily the conceptional paradox in the methodological approach itself. In spite of (somewhat ritualistically) repeated warnings against the pitfalls of binary thinking and the problematic of ethnic/racial homogenization, the postcolonial paradigm relies heavily on the binarism of ‘hybrid’ ethnicities versus ‘white’ Western/North American civilization. On the rhetorical level, this binarism expresses itself, for example, in the uncritical use of the term ‘eurocentric.’ Another case in point in the present work is the chapter title “Shattering the North American Dream,” a construction by which the differences between the two national cultures are already on the grammatical level ‘homogenized’ into one singular whole. The underlying rationale behind such homogenizations is to establish a rhetorical scenario of ‘us’ against ‘them,’ in which Western/North American civilization is cast into the role of the ‘white’ villain. The result is a somewhat reductive interpretive pattern in which verbs such as ‘shatter,’ ‘explode,’ ‘challenge,’ ‘subvert,’ ‘debunk,’ ‘expose,’ etc. serve as interchangeable signifiers of an always already presupposed posture of postcolonial ‘resistance’ against the evils of ‘Western colonialist hegemony.’

As a consequence, the study gives the impression that it is methodically somewhat ‘imprisoned’ within the discursive (and ideological) confinements of the postcolonial paradigm. Here and there, this leads to jargon-ridden (and in view of the material presented not really convincing) generalizations such as: “The silencing of North American drama in the form of its African-, (South) Asian-, and indigenous heritages is part of an ongoing process of colonialist surveillance [...]” (xliii). More importantly, it leads to an undifferentiated view of the interplay between resistance and adaptation. Granted, for example, that the American Dream and the Canadian ideal of multiculturalism are concepts with problematic ideological implications, a more balanced ‘functionalist’ model would have to consider that these concepts have, on the other hand, an important discursive blueprint function that makes them adaptable for diverse cultural needs and political agendas, thus also providing a legitimizing basis from which (al-

ready existing or newly incoming) minority groups can claim their right to 'belong.'

It has to be re-emphasized, however, that this critique is primarily directed at the methodological paradigm in general. Considering its discursive power in today's literary and cultural studies departments, the confinements

of that paradigm are probably not so easy to overstep for a young scholar. In spite of its one-sided political bias, the work represents a substantial scholarly achievement that will provide a sound basis for future studies in the field.

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