

Eva Darías Beutell and María Jesús Hernández Lerena, eds. 2007: *Canon Disorders: Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States*. Logroño: La Universidad de la Rioja/Tenerife: Universidad de La Laguna. 186 pp. ISBN: 978-84-96487-7-2

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The book under consideration addresses the issue of the canon, both literary and filmic, and the ways gender studies have contributed to disordering its structuring principles during the last 25 years in both Canada and the United States. There, as the title graphically reads, in the words of the editors “feminist scholarship has insistently brought to the foreground the complex relationship between canon and power, uncovering the patriarchal ideology of our literary and cultural traditions and pushing the current questioning of the Cartesian subject in directions never explored before” (11). In this sense, it is a welcome addition to a critical literature that at the end of the eighties and in the early nineties started to dismantle traditional theories of value in order to give voice to those whom historical record had kept silent (Altieri 1990; Ruoff and Ward 1990; McMullen 1990; Lauter 1991; Lecker 1991; Winders 1991; Stimpson 1992; Guillory 1993; Alberti 1995). Despite its broad scope (bringing under scrutiny the disorder of Western canonical structures of thought and writing during the last decades is no small feat), the book is successfully circumscribed by way of five themes to which the canon has been blind: dirt, domesticity, performance, maternity and *ganzfeld* (or silence), through which the authors work to rethink the official catalogue of the good.

In their introduction Eva Darías Beutell and María Jesús Hernández Lerena historicize the changes in the notion of literature brought about by Alice Walker’s counterwriting, the oppositional stance of Chicana activists, the radical discourses of Arun Mukherjee and Marlene Nourbese Philip, together with the critique of Sara Mills in her 2005 work on gender and spatiality. Alliances between the gender valence and other constituencies of identity (race, class, age, space), and, by implication, relations between different realms of experience and connections across disciplines, are reviewed in a succinct and limpid way. Usefully this account guides readers to the issues the seven contributions of the book deal with, but, most of all, it is the economy of its style and the clarity of its exposition that make it an excellent tool for students and researchers willing to examine the arrangements that produce canonical knowledge.

One of the great assets of the book is the first chapter, ‘Hanging Out the Laundry: Heroines in the Midst of Dirt and Cleanliness’ by Canadian writer Aritha van Herk, author of 5 novels to date, 2 works of ficto-criticism and an “illegitimate history”, her words, entitled *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* (2005). Aritha van Herk works through a diversity of texts ranging from the films *Quills* (2000) and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2003), directed by Philip Kaufman and Peter Mullan respectively, the novels *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood and *Joan Makes History* (1988) by

Kate Grenville, the short-story collection *China Dog* (1997) by Judy Fong Bates, and the fictional memoir of Maxine Hong Kingston: *The Woman Warrior* (1975). In them the critic examines the metaphor of laundry and, essentially, discovers in it a useful tool to “scrutinize the extent to which the privileges of class, leisure, and cleanliness have served the canonical project” (42), which is read as a generic one because laundry has since the beginning of time been aligned with domesticity and femaleness. Still, the author is not concerned with middle-class wives and mothers who, thanks to feminism and its theories of literary representation, have been smugly accommodated into the canon. Rather, her concern is with the othered, that is the indigent and the invisible (maids, servants, criminals, outcasts, and immigrants) who get their hands dirty and remain outside the canon, even though they are usually in charge of the story by virtue of seeing what “no one else sees” (29). In short, van Herk appraises the canonical through the unrefreshed or uncanonical linen in order to “argue for a renovated literary canon, one aware that it cannot escape being plunged into boiling water” (43), and in the process transforms a corporeal metaphor into a transcendental one, or rather, makes of transcendence a matter of bodies. Cleverly, the author points to the paradox of assigning the task of purification to those classed as impure, and hints at the connection between impurity and canonization, into which, unfortunately, she does not delve.

In the second chapter Eva Darías Beutell brilliantly examines Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s first work, *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996), a novel that contributes to a rich tradition of Canadian women’s writings engaged with rural and small-town life (Alice Munro), regional identities (Sandra Birdsell and Margaret Lawrence), the Canadian gothic (Margaret Atwood), and the metaphoric dimensions of the wilderness (Marian Engel, Arita van Herk). Although firmly grounded in this Canadian tradition of foundational myths, Darías Beutell explains that Anderson-Dargatz pushes it in a new direction. The text runs smoothly and reads well as the author proceeds by articulating this process of redirection “at three different levels that eventually overlap: the writing of the pioneer narrative, the analysis of the metaphoric meaning of the Canadian wilderness vis-à-vis the Western Canadian homesteading, and the recuperation of the Aboriginal cultures in the country’s myths of origin” (46). So, even though Anderson-Dargatz replicates the plot and structure of pioneer women’s writing, she draws our attention to inter-gender relations and intercultural considerations by juxtaposing the wild and the domestic, revising the wilderness as a trope different from that articulated by Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, and bringing in the Aboriginal. Yet, as the author of this essay insists, despite advocating contact with nature, the novel, unlike Sharon Butala’s *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994), veers away from an uncritical celebration of living in the backwoods and erodes any essentialist expectations that readers might accommodate by straining the binaries of culture/nature colonizing/colonized, and consequently, masculine/feminine.

Chapters 3 and 4 address performance. María Jesús Hernández Lerena focuses on Marguerite de Roberval, the first French settler in Canada, as performed by Douglas Glover in *Elle* (2003). It is useful to remember here Judith Butler’s definition of performance as the possibility to disrupt the law by parody (1993: 225, 234), because it is by way of parody that Glover develops the theme of the foundation of the Canadian

nation, also touched upon in the previous chapter. Although Glover takes Marguerite as the metaphor of the Canadian colonial condition, he de-constructs the character through his readings of current critiques of gender and postcolonialism. The result is a libidinous and vengeful woman, incisively critical, knowledgeable of the grammar of feminism, who rather than submitting to the rigidity of the social rules by which she is supposed to abide, becomes herself the originator of events. Hernández Lerena makes two inferences from here: First, by including theoretical concerns in the flow of the narrative, not only does Glover turn the story into an essay, transform his character into a literary critic, and question the validity of official (hi)stories, but also, within the same movement, he claims that criticism has narrative status. Second, by exposing the reader to two different mechanisms of comprehension (theory and story) Glover makes Marguerite “more real because we recognize [...] (her) experience in the way contemporary criticism has codified it and made it familiar” (87). Lerena’s thesis that theorization of experience makes it familiar is an exciting contribution that challenges the rationalist conception of theory as the objective view of a subject undisturbed by the burden of emotions. To her it is precisely theory that helps readers engage with the text in emotional terms. All in all, however, the word *impersonation* in the title receives scant attention. It is not clear in which ways Glover pretends to be Marguerite de Roberval, nor is it explained how Glover’s Marguerite imitates the woman who was abandoned by her uncle on the north shore of St. Lawrence in 1542.

Just as theoretically well informed is the next chapter by Vicente R. Rosselló Hernández on masculinity as performed in documentary films. After presenting a necessarily brief account of gender, performativity, masculinities and documentary studies, he reflects on the intersections between them through a close reading of three documentary films by white directors: Rob Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), Peter Lynch’s Oscar-nominated *Project Grizzly* (1996), and Henry A. Rubin & Dana A. Shapiro’s cult-classic *Murderball* (2005). The first two interrogate the category of white heterosexual masculinity by parodying its prosthetic character. The third, by contrast, which depicts a U.S. professional quadriplegic rugby team, reclaims an aggressive manhood by disavowing disability: “The wheelchair, often taken as a shameful mark of impotence, is deftly transformed into a weapon, and draws grandiose comparisons with filmic exemplars of militant virility (*Mad Max*, *Gladiator*)” (112). The author moves on to debate the tensions inherent in competitive sports and ponders on the rhetoric that aligns manhood and national formations. The chapter is an exploration of the non-canonical within the canonical since the three movies are now recognized as classics. Otherwise, it is remarkable inasmuch as it redresses the scant attention gender matters have so far received in the medium of the documentary.

The next section focuses on maternity. Dulce María Rodríguez González probes the Freudian Oedipal narrative in ‘The Double Image’ and ‘Listen’ by Anne Sexton and Alicia Ostriker respectively, so as to claim that the traditional father-son dyad is dismantled in the poems written by women during the last decades of the 20th century, and replaced by the mother-daughter relationship. The author reviews the theories of individuation developed by Sigmund Freud, Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow, Jacques Lacan, Margaret Mahler and Jane Flax to conclude by saying, with Nancy Friday, that: “in a sense we [children] continue to be physically connected to her, just as the mother

psychologically still experiences us almost a part of her body, her own narcissistic extension. The symbiosis is mutual, complete, and satisfying” (1979: 58). And yet, separation from the mother becomes imperative in order to achieve subjectivity (Rich 1986: 236). When separation is hindered, the daughter is flooded by a feeling of guilt that gives way to self-destructive behaviors. Within this paradigm the author offers her own reading of these two poems. In the first, Sexton deals with the loss of her daughter Joyce, who is left under the care of her paternal grandmother due to her mother’s precarious mental state. Because Sexton overidentifies with her own mother, who died of cancer, she feels incapable of setting her own course, turning to her daughter to affirm her identity. The second poem, ‘Listen’, depicts a mother who, hogtied by her daughter’s independence, engages in a quest for a consoling substitute.

Gloria Evangelina Alzandúa’s autobiographical encounters with her mother is the issue of chapter 6 by María Henríquez Betancor. Like many other texts by Sandra Cisneros, Norma E. Cantú, Cherríe Moraga, and Sheila and Sandra Ortiz-Taylor, who experiment with the form of life writing by including poetry, stories, plays, photographs, recipes, pieces of fantasy, myth, and fiction, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) is difficult to classify. As Sonia Saldívar-Hull states, it “continually refuses stasis. Shifting from Mexico-*tejana* history, to personal testimonial, the text moves restlessly onward to a history of a larger political family” (1999:3). True as this is, the author focuses on Alzandúa’s biological family and sustains that it was the insistence of her mother, Amalia, on her behaving as tradition dictated that pushed her into rebellion “towards the search of her own freedom as an independent chicana who had her own political ideas as a Marxist and openly declared a forbidden sexual orientation as a lesbian” (145). Like the daughter in ‘Listen’, Alzandúa attains independence, but only at the cost of pain and fear, the details of which she is quick to describe, contravening Estelle Jelinek’s dictum that autobiographies as a rule avoid intimate and shameful conflicts (1980: 12-15). Henríquez Betancor, however, does not stop at the moment of separation but investigates how the mother-daughter relationship is reconstructed when the latter finds a common space for both and reconnects to Amalia. The essay concludes with an illuminating reflection on Alzandúa becoming her own mother, that is, giving herself birth, when adopting the Aztec goddess Coatlicue’s image, a “symbolic presence that creates, reinforces, and constructs her complex multicultural and multiethnic self” (156).

It is not coincidental that the editors have decided to complete this collection with the innovative essay of Madlen Kurajica on the poetics of silence in Robert Kroetsch’s *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (2001). In the novel, Raymond tries to bring back to life the memories of poet Rita Kleinhart, his lover, who has mysteriously disappeared after entering the space that artist James Turrell has constructed with light. The narrative does not explain her self-erasure but the critic examines the motivations behind her act, which, in his words, “comes to stand not only as a powerful blow against traditional modes of conceiving subjectivity but as a serious challenge to any kind of representation stemming from the binary operations of the machine we call language” (163). Next he examines the ways Rita’s escape disrupts language and perception through Deleuze and Guattari’s work on subjectivity as an intensity of fluid, “unpredictable movements, random velocities, [and] surprising effects” (163), always

becoming, rhizomatic, in a plane of immanence (*ganzfeld*) that refuses organization and borders. Also operating with the laws of chaos theory Kurajica explains that Rita's silence contaminates the language of others inside and outside the text ("*ganzfeld* effect") and demands that we become "poets of becoming" (157). It comes as no surprise, then, that Kroetsch steps into his own narrative to spend time with his female protagonist. All that notwithstanding, the basic contradiction resides in the fact that, after all, we have a story, and even though it is of a different kind it is still made of language.

Those who approach this book looking for a history of the uncanonical (if a history there is) or an organized deconstruction of its structuring principles will certainly be disappointed. Its strength resides in the variety of theoretical perspectives and in the decision to dissect the canon through the examination of those topics its makers have relegated to the fringes. The use of canonical works (by Gloria Alzandúa, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Kate Grenville or Robert Kroetsch) to dismantle the canon indicates that disorder is a constituent part of the canon and brings us into awareness of our own complicity in the process of canon-making. Still, when the authors claim for the need "to open up (the canon) to include the work of the previously excluded" (13), one wonders why no more excluded authors have been brought in. The overall conception of the book would have profited from a deeper reflection on the transformation the canon has undergone in the last 20 years (what was non-canonical in the late eighties has by now been consecrated as good), and on the castrating effects canonization exerts over the revolutionary potentialities of a previously excluded work. On the other hand, the gendered perspectives on film the title promises are not completely fulfilled. Why just one chapter on filmic disorders? And does not the process of canonization operate differently in different registers and different media? But this does not lessen the merits of the book. I hope that the editors are already thinking of another volume of filmic disorders to broaden the picture.

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