

Sabine Doff, Frank Schulze-Engler (Eds.)

Beyond 'Other Cultures'

Transcultural Perspectives on Teaching
the New Literatures in English

Reflections

Literatures in English
outside Britain and the USA

Albert-Reiner Glaap (Ed.)

Band 21

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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

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Edited by Sabine Doff and Frank Schulze-Engler. –

Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011

(Reflections. Literatures in English

outside Britain and the USA ; Bd. 21)

ISBN 978-3-86821-286-0

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

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ISBN 978-3-86821-286-0

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

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Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504

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Beyond ‘Other Cultures’: An Introduction

Sabine Doff and Frank Schulze-Engler

At first sight, understanding ‘other cultures’ seems a perfectly reasonable procedure in literature and language teaching. The magic formula for achieving this understanding is often held to be the development of ‘intercultural competence’, i.e. the capacity to become aware of one’s own cultural presuppositions and prejudices and to engage in a respectful and productive interchange with supposedly ‘other cultures’. Becoming adept in a hermeneutics of cultural alterity not only appears to be a natural prerequisite for handling culturally different texts in the classroom, but also promises to make teaching and learning processes particularly relevant in an increasingly globalized world faced with the multiple challenges of unlearning deeply entrenched colonial hierarchies of cultural value based on notions of ‘advanced’ and ‘primitive’ cultures, of coming to terms with the cultural multiplicity and diversity characterizing a large array of societies across the globe, and of promoting cross-cultural dialogue in a post-9/11 world threatened by a revival of suprematism, prejudice and xenophobia.

While meeting these challenges undoubtedly constitutes a necessary pedagogical objective, there are good reasons to doubt whether the very idea of ‘other cultures’ itself is conducive to reaching that goal. If a more or less absolute cultural difference is posited as the starting point for processes of ‘intercultural learning’, and essentialist binary oppositions between one’s own culture and ‘strange’, ‘alien’ or ‘other cultures’ are set up, the well-meant pedagogical objective of ‘intercultural understanding’ actually reproduces stereotyped notions of cultural difference that are hard to reconcile with the social and cultural realities that teachers and learners are faced with in an increasingly globalised world.

For much of the 19th century, many people around the globe were firmly convinced that we live in a world of races. For much of the 20th century, many people were equally convinced that we live in a world of cultures. This idea still has its appeal, particularly in the humanities, but its heyday is clearly over. In the wake of rapidly accelerating globalisation processes not only in the economic, but also in the political, social and cultural sphere, the notion of understanding the social world exclusively or even primarily in terms of ‘cultures’ has lost much of its credibility. Even anthropologists (who once played such an important role in making us believe that the social world comes to us readily packaged into ‘cultures’) have become highly sceptical of this idea: they have pointed out that the cultural realities for most people in the world are much more complex than simplistic notions of ‘cultures’ as irreducibly different or even incommensurable symbolic worlds of their own seem to suggest, and that the real challenge in coming to terms with this cultural complexity encountered in

the social world lies in exploring the cultural practices of individuals and social groups that operate within what has in fact become a globally interlinked network of culture:

As people move with their meanings, and as meanings find ways of travelling even when people stay put, territories cannot really contain cultures. And even as one accepts that culture is socially acquired and organized, the assumption that it is homogeneously distributed within collectivities becomes problematic, when we see how their members' experiences and biographies differ. (Hanerz 1998, 8)

The very idea of the social world as 'a world of cultures' – that during its 20th century heyday constituted a significant advance with regard to earlier Eurocentric conceptions of culture based on the idea that some (presumably 'advanced') parts of the world possessed culture while others were dominated by barbarism, primitivism and superstitions – has thus turned from an asset into a liability. The real challenge for cultural and literary theory today arguably lies in thinking beyond the automatically evoked framework of 'a world of cultures' to explore the potential of new, 'singular' concepts of culture:

The idea of cultures in the plural is problematic; no doubt difficult to do away with for historical and ideological as well as scholarly reasons, but often little more than a tentative and limited intellectual organizing device. Yet at the same time, the idea of culture in the singular, encompassing the entire more or less organized diversity of ideas and expressions, may become more important than it has been, as we explore the way humanity inhabits the global ecumene. (Hanerz 1998, 23)

Perceiving this "entire diversity of ideas and expressions" in terms of cultural alterity and 'other cultures' thus runs the risk of reinforcing rather than dismantling persistent stereotypes. As Paul Gilroy has argued in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, recent decades have seen the transformation of 'older' types of racism focusing on biology into 'new' racisms based on culture; it is this alleged incommensurability of cultures (which Samuel Huntington reworked into the infelicitous notion of "the clash of civilizations", see Huntington 1996) that according to Gilroy underpins much of contemporary racism and has given rise to "the sham wisdom of incommensurable cultural difference, contending civilizations, opposed religions, and untranslatable customs" (Gilroy 2005, 143). Needless to say, not all evocations of cultural difference and intercultural communication can be associated with this "sham wisdom", but the idea of distinct cultures to which individuals are somehow imagined to 'belong' (which underlies much of 'intercultural' pedagogic theory) undeniably reinforces rather than dismantles 'strong' notions of cultural alterity:

[W]hile interculturalism has the definite virtue of drawing attention to the political as well as aesthetic demands of cultural difference and diversity, it tends ironically to founder on precisely the hypostasized, even fetishised appreciation of 'other cultures' ('fremde Kulturen') to which its purportedly dynamic understanding of cultural exchange and interaction is designed to show the door. In addition, interculturalism still presupposes some kind of break between separate cultures [...]. (Huggan 2006, 58)

In an attempt to move beyond this "break between separate cultures", recent cultural and literary theory has shown a marked tendency to move away from proprietary no-

tions of culture that see people (and texts) as determined by 'their' respective culture towards more flexible concepts such as hybridity, creolization or transculturality that relate to a growing interest in the specific modes in which individuals and groups 'do culture' as a social practice. The idea of 'a world of (separate) cultures' is supplanted by the notion of a globally constituted "pool of culture" from which "individuals or different kinds of collectivities come to assemble their particular repertoires" (Hannerz 1998, 49). While theories of hybridity and creolization have often been associated with migration and diasporic communities (see Bhabha 1994), cultural theorists have also highlighted the fact that cultures travel even when people stay put, and that cultural difference can no longer be perceived in terms of 'deep alterity':

One no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the world. (...) 'Cultural' difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence. A whole structure of expectations about authenticity in culture and in art is thrown in doubt. (Clifford 1988, 14)

As a result, the notion that people, cultural artifacts or literary texts are determined by (presumably one) culture of origin has met with considerable scepticism across a wide range of disciplines. A major contribution to this sceptical perspective has come from postcolonial theorists who have extrapolated their findings on colonial constructions of allegedly unitary and homogenous cultures to the complex realities of a postcolonial world in which the legacies of the illusory homogeneity of culture produced by colonial discourse still make their presence felt. As Edward Said has put it:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things. (Said 1993: 407-408)

In recent years, transculturality has emerged as a new approach to culture particularly suited to exploring the hybridity of individual and collective identities and the cultural 'connections between things' in an increasingly globalized world. The German philosopher Wolfgang Iser has highlighted the fact that transcultural connections shape human interaction not only on the macro level of cultures and societies, but also on the micro level of everyday life – and that of a wide variety of cultural practices, including literature:

Contemporary cultures are heavily interlinked and intertwined. Ways of life no longer end at the borders of former single cultures (the alleged national cultures), but transcend them and can also be found in other cultures. (...) Transculturality is advancing not only on the social macro level, but also on the individual micro level. Most of us are determined in our cultural formation by *several* cultural origins and connections. We are cultural hybrids. Contemporary writers, for ex-

ample, point out that they are not shaped by *one* home country, but by influences of various origins (...). (Welsch 2005, 323 and 326, orig. emph.)¹

The so-called ‘New Literatures in English’ provide a fascinatingly diverse corpus of literary texts shaped by such “influences of various origins”. While in the past they were often perceived as discrete national literatures, today they are increasingly seen in terms of a globally linked communicative network encompassing Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific as well as manifold interfaces with Britain and the USA. This network encompasses both native as well as second-language speakers and writers and interacts with an almost infinite variety of local cultural ensembles that are themselves characterized by a high degree of cultural mixture, creolization and hybridity. Anglophone texts, films and other media created within this network are thus transcultural products per se: they often engage intimately with local cultures, traditions and languages, but they do so by employing a globally mediated communicative framework, and often enough in full awareness of the fact that the societies, cultures and people they explore are themselves products of “overlapping territories and intertwined histories” (Said 1993, 1). They are thus neither simple expressions of those ‘other cultures’ conjured up by benign or malign alterity discourses, nor are they harbingers of a new global monoculture, as some critics of globalization suggest. They allow insights into the complexity of culture rather than laying bare ‘other cultures’, and they challenge readers to come to terms with cultural difference without falling back into the conventional wisdoms produced by a global alterity industry. It is this ‘constitutive transculturality’ (to use the term employed by Bill Ashcroft in his contribution to this volume) that makes the New Literatures in English particularly valuable for teaching about culture in the EFL classroom.

This fundamental shift of perspective from ‘cultural realism’ towards a renewed interest in the complexity of cultural practices enacted in cultural and literary studies has also affected the conception of learning and teaching about culture which has always formed an integral part of the foreign language classroom and the academic discourse in foreign language education. For English language teachers in particular this development marks a turning point, since they belong to a profession that has repeatedly been accused of actively contributing to ‘linguistic imperialism’ (Philipson 1992).

1 Transl. S.D. and F.SE. The original text reads: “Zeitgenössische Kulturen sind denkbar stark miteinander verbunden und verflochten. Die Lebensformen enden nicht mehr an den Grenzen der Einzelkulturen von einst (der vorgeblichen Nationalkulturen), sondern überschreiten diese, finden sich ebenso in anderen Kulturen. (...) Transkulturalität dringt nicht nur auf der sozialen Makroebene, sondern ebenso auf der individuellen Mikroebene vor. Die meisten unter uns sind in ihrer kulturellen Formation durch *mehrere* kulturelle Herkünfte und Verbindungen bestimmt. Wir sind kulturelle Mischlinge. Zeitgenössische Schriftsteller beispielsweise betonen, dass sie nicht durch *eine* Heimat, sondern durch Einflüsse verschiedener Herkünfte geprägt sind (...).”