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## Border Writing: The Multidisciplinary Text by D. Emily Hicks

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The evidence Tamburri provides for his case suggests only possibilities of what could happen when his theory is applied.

His paradigmatic suggestions are in need of application, and without providing readings of representative works, this essay is likely to remain more a manifesto than a documentation of radical theory in practice. However, what he has presented here is the first major suggestion of a way of reading Italian/American writers since Rose Basile Green's sociological categories. With this work, Tamburri has offered a model that needs to be applied to writing and other cultural products created by Americans of Italian descent. He has also upped the ante for those who wish to contribute to the on-going project of criticizing Italian/American culture.

While this is a "little book," it has certainly earned its place on the shelf of books by indigenous critics of Italian/American culture, alongside Olga Peragallo's *Italian-American Authors and Their Contribution to American Literature* (1949) and Rose Basile Green's *The Italian American Novel* (1974). *To Hyphenate* will certainly be looked upon as a milestone on the path to developing serious consideration and criticism of Italian/American literature and culture.

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***Border Writing: The Multi-dimensional Text***

D. Emily Hicks

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991

This is an important book owing both to its theoretical subtlety and its

actual critical praxis. It certainly stands as a major contribution to Latin American studies and, by analogy, to ethnic and intercultural studies, including Italian American studies. The questions raised by the author are of the following type: How can we think about culture without nations? How can we assess the political import of works of art written in a language which is no longer the main means of everyday expression for their authors? How can we escape the iron law of critical dualisms, of dialectics between colonizer and colonized, First and Third World, dominant and dependent national groupings? Center and periphery models?

In his Foreword Neil Larsen sketches the two main currents of interpretation which have effectively served as "paradigms of postcolonial oppositional culture: the 'transcultural' and the 'anthropophagus'." The first is based on Fernando Ortiz' anthropology, developed by Angel Rama and positing that Latin American narrative texts avoid the "double bind in which one either settles for a direct imitation of metropolitan imports or seeks to expunge all 'foreign' cultural influences," and attempt instead to treat the regional or local culture itself as a species of language or code within which to "rearticulate or, in this sense, 'transculturates' the exotic cultural dominant." As compared to what was recorded and woven into art in past centuries—figuratively a highly educated upper-class writer stooping from the tree of knowledge and power with condescending gaze upon the ridiculous and uncouth world of marginal or minor cultural productions—here the poles are reversed and it is the minoritarian or tactful writer who pulls down the imports from alleged high and cosmopolitan culture, ironizing its contradictions, revealing their commodity-driven aesthetic veneer.

Supercilious satire has given way to disenchanting parody and political comedy. See for example the "neoregionalist" writings of Arguedas or Guimarães Rosa. This critical stance favors the analysis of the production of literature, not so much its consumption. On the other hand, the "Manifesto antropofago" of the Brazilian vanguardist Oswald de Andrade

advocates a practice of . . . "consumptive production," whereby the metropolitan cultural import, rather than being simply recoded and then abruptly reinserted into the same, exclusive network of cultural distribution, undergoes an even more radical subversion by being directly appropriated as simply one motif of a dynamic, post-colonial *mass* culture that can consume without losing its national-cultural identity. (xiii)

This is very postmodern in its premises, allowing for the interpretation of "new" literary constituencies without the obligation of immediately establishing how much of another dominant or canonic literature it has vampirized, as if it stood in aesthetic dependency or moral debt of it. Quite the contrary, references and reworkings of more established, mainstream or canonized texts are simply an aspect, a part of a totally *other* set of writerly problems and ideological and psychological contents. Yet academic critics have used and abused the notion of "magic realism" to speak of an entire production by emphasizing the magic and downplaying the realism part. Whereas Magic glosses over regional differences, Realism is willy-nilly that of the greater European-American mind set, rooted in empirical fact. This book is also a proposal to rethink what was done with the critical notion of Magic Realism, and for Hicks the term is now misleading. The intermediate way is one which was first proposed by Cuban poet and critic Roberto Fernández

Retamar in the 1960s and the 1970s which called "for a rejection of a 'universal' literary culture and holding up Latin America's 'hybrid' cultures as models for a new, postimperial order of limitless regional differences" (xv). In short, it required a non-essentialist grasp of the historical developments of cultural nationalism. And, I might add, a certain stoic pride in one's difference.

Poststructuralist thought, a pragmatic semiotics, discourse analysis and the economic force involved in image and icon exchanges are requisite background hermeneutics to properly situate Hicks's proposal. The notion of "border writing," even before we seek to use it as a methodology to read texts—as the author proceeds to do on the textual corpus of García Márquez, Luisa Valenzuela and Julio Cortázar, all of whom wrote while living "elsewhere," sort of exiles from their own national/cultural amniotic fluid—enacts a theoretical claim, a grounding statement, one which is in principle not interested in being empowered and canonized by a white-male-dominated European/ North American canon, and is rather taken to mobilize the non-place of writing in the fight against any form of canon, or dominant current, or state ideology: "border writing [seeks to undermine] the distinction between original and alien culture." In so doing, it defuses or devalues a number of false or useless critical paradigms predicated upon metaphysical (and hypocritical) dualisms, *alta e bassa cultura* oppositions, mind-body sort of thing.

Border writing, on the other hand, is a rich hermeneutic figura. It allows for the description "of the mediation of a logic of nonidentity," a discursive practice which acknowledges the pull of a stable system but will not refuse to let imagination play its role in the shaping of reality. Border writing must



speak metaphorically, it does not possess the territory, and its language thrives on memory. Hicks's theorem requires that we accept the text primarily as a set of images, in a multidimensional sense, because meanings are never direct:

In border writing, the subject is decentered and the object is not present or immediate but displaced. Border writers re-present that attitudes toward objects as they exist in more than one cultural context. (xxiv)

The critic here sets a parallel with Benjamin's notion of a "dialectical image," in part to rescue a dynamic component to the workings of the theory, and in part to ground a conjoining of the subjective and the accidental.

In this context, the notion finds support in Deleuze and Guattari's work on Franz Kafka and the possibility of creating a new subject of study, called "Minor Literature." There is no question that twenty years later Deleuze and Guattari's ideas still sound fresh and fruitful. A Minor Literature, like border writing, is immediately without a territory, a stable referent:

I propose considering Franz Kafka, a Czech Jew who lived in Prague and wrote in German, as an example of a writer of border literature. . . . Border writing emphasizes the differences in reference codes between two or more cultures. It depicts, therefore, a kind of realism that approaches the experience of border crossers, those who live in a bilingual, bicultural, biconceptual reality. I am speaking of cultural, not physical, borders: the sensibility that informs border literature can exist among guest workers anywhere, including European countries in which the country of origin does not share a physical border with the host country. (xxv)

In the context of her research, Hicks demonstrates this to be a dominant theme in the fiction of García Márquez, Valenzuela and Cortázar, wherein plot and character seem to

privilege situations of ambivalence, crossings, translations, relocations: "Like Kafka, who as a writer experienced the deterritorialization of language, the reader of border writing may experience a deterritorialization of signification" (xxvi). This raises issues of communication, and so the border text must create its own audience, it must express itself in various ways: music, performances, video whenever possible.

Finally, however, despite the suggestive possibility of having to deal with subjectivities rooted in two or more cultural codes simultaneously, border writing must also be anchored in the *reality* of borders, with their harsh socioeconomic dimension.

The border crosser is linked, in terms of identity, activity, legal status, and human rights, to the border machine, with its border patrol agents, secondary inspection, helicopters, shifts in policy, and *maquiladoras*. (xxvi)

It is in this way that one can read a text written between two languages, or in two worlds simultaneously. The relationship between the aesthetic and the political here is sort of conflated:

The border machine, which produces the border subject, is subject to "flows" that depend on the labor needs of California growers; its codes are continually changing, as they are connected to and determined by the political and juridical machines of Washington and Mexico City.

There is no question about the viability of this theorem. It can certainly be applied to Italian American fiction, where especially in the earlier part of the century certain national or ethnic traits were defined in terms of the contrast between two cultural codes, for instance, being regional Italian in the home, and being assimilated American middle-of-the-road urban or exurban denizen. But because of their very own origins, some of these characters

had to forge themselves a language, a style. If it doesn't live up to academically sanctioned models, or rhetorical tropes in the encyclopedias and dictionaries of literary theory, that's not a failing, but a victory. As Harry Polkinhorn has stated,

Chicano writing at least in part short-circuited the power lines of transmission of the European avant-garde and broader modernist tendencies, which had much more of an impact on Latin American practitioners. . . . By contrast with this richness of cultural embeddedness, Chicano literature was born *ex nihilo*, as it were, with connections less to a long tradition of oppositional art but more to one of oppressed social experience. (xxvi)

It is this disclosure of a mysterious, many-sided world of new social imaginaries that makes border writing theory very engaging. Short-circuit the logical connectedness of our evolutionary rationalisms and pragmatisms. Ignore the grand theory presuppositions, such as whether it reflects a Kantian, or Hegelian, or Marxian, or Mill's views. Do relate to the text in terms of its deterritorialization, its political import, its collective significance. In this fashion, the criticism created as a response to border writing will be marked by a political engagement, a contesting spirit, a will toward others, as "it takes a critical view of authority and supports the imaginative." Certainly there are echoes of a late-1960s style of reading the political inside the aesthetic artifact, of taking a critical stance in a sort of perennial opposition to some System, or General. That only demonstrates the critical persistence of a modality, a style of intellectual commitment, not that its development through the 1990s is any less urgent and compelling.

Italian American literary theory should take into account this critical model because its point of entry into

the social and political contents of a novel is not informed by a pre-existing sense of identity or recognition, but by the specificity of the subjectivities, the characters they give life to in the narration. In this sense, border writing, like bilingual writing, is intrinsically nomadic—indeed we might even say migrant, in the sense in which migration is the largest ring of a global configuration, and subtends as differentia the style and topos of exile, the expatriate, the vagabond, Hungarian gypsies and Tuareg nomads. This metaphor of nomadic writing is also a French confection from the remains of Nietzsche, and it has served its purpose as a hermeneutic figura rather well for over two decades.

If the theory may be exhausted on some fronts—say, in feminist writing—it does not mean that applying it to new terrain may not resuscitate it and make it change its and our minds. Hicks suggests that border writing may offer a new form of knowledge, wherein if

the word is sick: in order to heal it, the writer must free it from the teleological and bring it across the border into architecture. This historic journey will reterritorialize it. The global body needs to be healed. Border writing holds out this possibility, through its combination of perception and memory, of subverting the rationality of collective suicide, of calming the storm of progress blowing from Paradise—the ability to withstand the pull of the future destruction to which one's face is turned. (xxxi)

With this last somewhat nihilistic assertion, Emily Hicks boldly claims that criticism must have a deep ethical component, a vision of the entirely interconnected worlds of cultural and social coexistence, and a political belief in the rights of the displaced, the strangers, the borderline figures who taunt our American unconscious.

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