

Caton, Lou Freitas. *Reading American Novels and Multicultural Aesthetics: Romancing the Postmodern Novel*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Hardcover. Pp. xviii, 265. \$79.95.

For about a decade now, Lou Freitas Caton has been at the advancing forefront of a vitally important conversation in multicultural scholarship, comparative studies, and “New Aesthetics.” Partly captured in the anthology *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* the critic edited with Emory Elliott and Jeffrey Rhyne in 2002, the debate remains both pressing and difficult. In essence, it revolves around the contested notion of “multicultural aesthetics,” and, quite understandably, the first questions it raises concern the very possibility of such an ‘aesthetics’: Is there or can there be one? Can we imagine, in other words, *one* interpretive paradigm likely to do justice to a plethora of literary and cultural traditions? And, if we can, what role do aesthetic and formal considerations might play in it? More to the point: can we base interpretation and evaluation of particular works on aesthetic criteria not necessarily or not entirely grounded in those works’ immediate cultural-historical contexts? Caton has tackled these questions and their thorny issues in essays and conference papers with diligence, philosophical insight, and exemplary intellectual honesty, and I am glad to see he comes back to this problematic in the 2007 book to tie up the loose ends and formulate a position in terms that I find timely, clear, and thought-provoking.

They are timely for a number of reasons. One of them is what I would call the multiculturalist paradox: the more multicultural America (along with the world at large) becomes, the less prepared to read its multicultural output we seem to be. Thus, logically, the “classical” reading model of multiculturalism must be updated. The static-separatist notion of culture this model has been largely based on is less and less relevant to, and productive in, the “network society.” Within the latter’s increasingly neighbouring and communicating stories, myths, motifs, and world pictures—within this “lateral” or rhizomic “worldliness”—the issue is how to make sense of those “we” of necessity “are with” (next to) even when we are not (and especially when we are not or appear not to be) like them. We are in relation with them, but they are not our relatives. In fact, they are “others” to us. So, underlying all the questions thus far raised is the question: how do we handle otherness? It goes without saying, if one wants to be a critic of *multiculturalism*, a comparatist of any kind, or a postcolonial critic for that matter—and more and more critics of contemporary literature and culture feel that they cannot *not* be—then one “cannot play it safe” and read only kin and kind (incidentally, the safety in-

volved in this case is illusory: the case can be made, and Caton is making it compellingly, that the self is not easier to get a handle on than the other). In brief, one must step across, into otherness.

Now, the problem is that most recent theories of interpretation, including those that have shaped multicultural hermeneutics, posit this otherness as absolute, as absolutely unreadable, in an earnest effort to prevent epistemological “colonization”: as we are told, one cannot take the other’s measure because the other is incommensurability itself. The predictable move inheres in variously formulated injunctions against “universalism,” “human nature,” “rationality,” “commonalities,” and other “shared values,” on the assumption that these values are equally shared neither in theory nor in practice once they are defined from an inevitably prescriptive (biased, ideological), if usually unacknowledged, cultural and political center.

This is where Caton makes his own countermove, a surprisingly romantic one. Going all the way back to romantic philosophy, particularly to Coleridge, his German sources, and his theories of selfhood and perception in the book’s first half (“Theory”), the author gets these controversial notions a new lease on life—on multicultural life, to be more specific. Revisited by Caton, “romanticism” (romantic “metaphysics,” “organicism,” and other related concepts) become in the second half (“Practice”) versatile heuristic tools in the hands of a critic of recent “ethnic” American literatures (note the plural) and cognate polemics around the “canon.” At first glance, Caton’s choice seems counterintuitive: for one thing, neither the literatures nor the polemics are romantic enough formally or thematically to lend themselves to a romantic reading; for another, it would be fair to say that the synthetic-organicist metaphor is overall at odds with these literatures’ unambiguously emancipatory politics. Nor do I find the connection between romanticism and postmodernism sufficiently developed analytically or historically (Diane Elam’s 1992 book *Romancing the Postmodern* would be, I imagine, one way of working out the terms’ interplay more thoroughly). At last, I would have preferred that Caton insist more on the revisionist construction he is actually putting on romanticism, that is, on the kind of romanticism he is retrieving for the benefit of today’s multiculturalist analysis. Without doubt, his is just one way of rereading the romantic tradition; there is another, no less credible, that leads us back to the origins of modern racism, nationalism, and even fascism—a far cry from any “protomulticulturalist” pronouncements.

In any event, I find the plea Caton enters on behalf of a certain romantic analysis quite persuasive. This plea pivots on two interlinked claims, both boiling down to the old *concordia discors* adage. The first has to do with the “immeasurable other” about which many critics working within (rather than

across) traditions are still so adamant. Much like the self, this other, Caton maintains, can be known by somebody in turn other to him or her. On this score, my stance is, simply speaking, more markedly Levinasian than Caton's (no wonder the author of *Totality and Infinity* gets no more than a footnote): this other can be known *up to a point* and, personally, I would make allowances for the hypothesis of a radical, impenetrable other, which possibility Caton does not accept consistently. This possibility does not rule out "authentic" knowledge (64) simply because all knowledge, including self-knowledge, is partial, and this is, we learn, another romantic lesson. To sum up: self and other are distinct yet can explore and know one another provided, I would specify in turn perhaps more emphatically than Caton, that we remain aware from what perspective and in whose interest the knowledge eventuates, what epistemological strategies are involved, and how they play out conceptually and politically.

I would make the same addition apropos of the second, related claim: self and other share a set of commonalities (such as mythical beliefs) as much as they share in the ever-failed, yet quintessential, pursuit of certain (romantic) ideals such as "justice"; they may not mean the same thing when they say "justice," but they come together in their failures to achieve it no matter what they designate by it. I think the same objection applies here, once again pertaining to the ideology of comparison, commonality, or sharing. Is the playing field even, one might legitimately ask. Who is sharing with whom and under what circumstances? Are the shares equal? More importantly perhaps, in whose language is this sharing set up and described?

Necessarily dense yet theoretically astute, the first part argues these and subsequent claims at length in painstakingly detailed rereading of key texts by Coleridge, F.O. Matthiessen, postcolonial critics like JanMohamed and Mohanty, and Paul de Man. The second part implements the claims across a series of interpretations of contemporary writers working in five ethno-racial and cultural traditions: Native American, Korean-American, Mexican-American, Caribbean-American, and "White European American." For my money, these are easily among the most powerful analyses I have read of works by now central to the postmodern American canon such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (chapter 5), Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (chapter 6), Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (chapter 7), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (chapter 8), and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (chapter 9). I have been teaching some of these novels regularly, and when I do it again I will definitely assign the relevant chapters in Caton's book because his analyses cut to the heart of many of the problems with which my students and I have been wrestling. The *Ceremony* essay, for example,

shows how Coleridge's view of connectedness can help us reframe the predicament of Silko's character Tayo as "ego-formation" in counterdistinction to a world to which otherwise the individual is linked. The outside of one's self or culture is the boundary—depicted by philosophers of liminality like Georg Simmel and Giorgio Agamben as "bridge" or "threshold"—that necessarily limits and opens us up, is the "being-within an outside" (Agamben) that affords us an inside, a inner world, and a home. I am not quite sold on the notion that this being-with(in) an outside, at or on the boundary between two different worlds "veil[s] similarity" (115). Proximity and interaction at the border do not require and need not lead to similarity, and, to my mind, that is a good thing too unless we know for sure who or what is, becomes, or is deemed similar to whom or what and for what reason; in other words, the case against "similarity" is similar to the case against "commonality" or against the "blending" Caton talks about in the Kincaid chapter. But "knowing for sure" is a dicey proposition, as the Lee chapter illustrates masterfully in its argument about imperfect comprehension of others as a foundation of "tolerance" (128). We run into this claim again in the next essay, albeit in another form, both surprising and shockingly perceptive: comparing Robbe-Grillet and Luis Rodriguez (that *is* a comparison!), Caton draws on the handling of sensations in *Always Running* to account for how the Mexican-American author regards and ultimately produces narrative meaning for a reader who thus stands a chance to "get it" by feeling rather than methodically "comprehending" a world he or she may not have been part of.

As I have pointed out, this is the challenge the multicultural critic must meet at every turn, if we take the notion of multiculturalism seriously, that is, as involving a multiplicity of cultural threads intertwined from the outset and evolving cross-culturally rather than separately. If we do, if we buy into the concept of cultural individuation as transculturation, as Caton forcefully recommends, than two things follow: first, we would probably need to recognize every reading as an "away game"—in this view, the DeLillo chapter is no exception (even though, I might add in passing, I would neither call the irony in *White Noise* "romantic" nor describe "postmodern vision" as "totalist"); and, second, the new (post-?) multiculturalist reading algorithm Caton works out in his elegant and groundbreaking book might just be what we need in order to play this game by its actual rules.

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