

A Diversity of Voices in Canadian Culture and Literature

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Abstract:

Canadian Literatures is an excellent introduction for all students new to the field of Canadian Studies. Editors Konrad Gross and Jutta Zimmermann collected an array of texts from all kinds of disciplines, ranging from politics, history, and law to literature and culture. Preceded by a very useful introductory chapter, the volume supports its readers by providing the necessary historical, political, and cultural context needed to acknowledge the diversity within Canadian Studies.

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"Over the course of more than a century, Canadian literature has not only stepped out of the British and American ambit, but also left behind the frame of nation thought of as a homogenous and stable entity" (p. 2). Thus reads the introduction to *Canadian Literatures*, which provides its readers with (excerpts from) a variety of texts, from historical travel accounts, legal and political documents, to essays discussing Canada's cultural and literary development.

The book is the fourth volume in the series of *Postcolonial Literatures in English: Sources and Resources*. The editors of the present volume, Konrad Gross and Jutta Zimmermann, chose 65 texts that are classified under six headings, following the format of the whole series: *Histories, Identities, Language, Education, Movements and Genres, and Transcultural Perspectives*. A concise introduction precedes these thematic sections and outlines the discussion about postcolonialism in the Canadian context.

The editors are aware of the "fundamental differences between white settler and conqueror colonies" (p. 1). They accurately notice that attempts at characterizing Canadian literature as national literature have mostly been replaced by accentuating "the heterogeneity of cultures represented by Canadian writers" (p. 2). Furthermore, they justify the use of postcolonial terminology by the fact that postcolonial issues and terms have long entered Canadian Studies and that "Canada can no longer be treated as simply the unrepenting white offspring of an imperialist white mother" (p. 2).

Apart from the general introduction, Gross and Zimmermann also provide their readers with background knowledge and contextual information throughout the whole book by adding their own explanatory footnotes where necessary. In addition, every text is complemented by a short introduction that gives some general information about the documents' sources and the context of its production. Even more, the reader also finds an index and a short bibliography at the end of the volume. While the former serves as a very helpful tool, the editors admit that faced with a variety of excellent publications coming out every year they "have been forced to declare [their] unconditional surrender" (p. 19) when it came to the bibliography, which nevertheless serves as a productive starting point for further research.

Consequently, Gross und Zimmermann aim to identify those arenas where postcolonial inquiries are most productive. To accomplish this objective they present texts dealing with Canada's

colonial past, putting specific emphasis on "the ruptures and bleak spots that have been lifted into the country's consciousness" in contemporary Canadian Studies (p. 2).

In the second part of the introduction the editors refer to some of the key events in Canada's history, politics, and culture. This twelve-page section is directly connected to the main body of the book: it prepares the readers for the following excerpts and helps them contextualize the various and often contradicting statements.

The first section on "Histories" includes eleven texts and starts with Basil H. Johnston's short story *The Prophecy* (1990) in which the tribal storyteller Daebaudjimoot relates his dream of white settlers eventually displacing First Nations' people. The following texts in this section are mostly concerned with the relation between First Nations and Whites.

Highlighting the ever-present discussion about a national Canadian identity, the "Identities" section is the largest in the book. This includes considerations of Canada as a northern nation (texts 15 and 33), as bicultural (text 12), or as multicultural (text 24). Together with the critical voices on multiculturalism (texts 26-29) that reemerge again in the section "Transcultural Perspectives" (text 61), the authors emphasize that instead of establishing one Canadian national identity, Canadian Studies has come to acknowledge a plurality of identities.

Sections three and four on "Language" and "Education" reflect the struggle between French and English Canada (texts 34-35), which in Mordecai Richler's words sometimes leads to a "national schizophrenia" (p. 129). Jeanette Armstrong's text for example establishes the strong connection between First Nations and the earth; meanwhile Robert Kroetsch argues for the importance of regional writing that reflects an authentic experience (cf. p. 127). The last text of section four characterizes Canada's residential schools as the most abusive system in Canadian history, and one which continues to affect the "lives of many Aboriginal people and communities" (p. 166).

A section that, with eleven texts on 26 pages, might seem to come up a bit short is "Movements and Genres." However, the editors have collected texts by Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, and Smaro Kamboureli, among others, depicting the general trends in Canadian literary criticism, such as the search for a national literature (text 48), the garrison mentality (text 50), the archetype of the victim in Canadian writing (text 51), and the ethno-cultural diversification (text 55).

Gross and Zimmermann have assembled an astonishing number of texts from a variety of fields and genres. The book provides a valuable overview of and introduction to key moments and documents in Canadian history and culture. As a volume that targets a European readership not yet familiar with Canadian Studies this book is a good start for everyone interested in the field. The volume may serve students well but is also a fruitful tool for more advanced researchers since it constantly points out the variety of voices in Canadian culture and literature. Those voices may not always be conclusive but they incite necessary debates.