

David Cowart 2006: *Trailing Clouds. Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP. 249 pp. ISBN: 10987654321

Mar Gallego Durán  
Universidad de Huelva  
mar@uhu.es

“All of us, from the first Adams to the Last Filipino,  
native born or alien,  
educated or illiterate—*We are America*”  
Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (1943)

The volume *Trailing Clouds. Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* by David Cowart is an interesting contribution to the field of contemporary American immigrant fiction from an unusual critical perspective. Intending to examine the contemporary immigrant imagination since 1970, Cowart proposes an approach to the texts that resists ethnic and postcolonial theories and focuses instead on these fictions as “an especially fertile field of transmuted desire” (3). This reading benefits from a broad interpretation of the American myth of inclusivity which, in turn, fosters a clearer appreciation of their literary qualities. In doing so, Cowart avails himself of a useful image: that of Wordsworth’s infant “trailing clouds of glory”, which explains the title of the book. For Cowart, immigrants remember a better past life, the ‘clouds of glory’, and they must undergo a process of maturation from a second phase of childhood to a new adulthood in the new country. The title itself proves very appropriate, since it foregrounds the often painful but rewarding process of immigrant adaptation. Despite its somehow narrow vision of the crucial contributions of ethnic and postcolonial theories to our contemporary understanding of immigrant fiction, the book is impressive in the wide range of texts that are discussed and as such is a valuable addition to other critical treatises on the topic, among them Roberta Simone’s *The Immigrant Experience in American Fiction* (1995), Gilbert Muller’s *New Strangers in Paradise: the Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* (1999), Katherine Payant and Toby Rose’s *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature* (1999), or more recently, Rebecca Walkowitz’s *Immigrant Fictions: Contemporary Literature in an Age of Globalization* (2007).

Cowart’s approach, thus, does not divide the chosen authors according to their ethnic origin or national identity, so the analysis of the texts makes for a nuanced reading of immigrant fiction, highly intertextual and sophisticated. As Leah Perry comments, “Cowart’s breath of literary knowledge is impressive” (2007: 184), as he is able to compare immigrants authors, some well-known like Saul Bellow, Julia Alvarez or Jamaica Kincaid but also others less-known like Chang-rae Lee or Mylène Dressler, with classic figures such as Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Chaucer, Whitman, Faulkner, Hemingway and many others. By the end of the volume he has well demonstrated one of his crucial points: “the freshness of their vision and the extraordinary quality of their

writing" (206). Cowart testifies to the significant literary quality of immigrant production by making use of an excellent array of theoretical models ranging from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, historiography, deconstruction, semiotics, to W. E. B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness or even allegedly rejected postcolonial theory. On the way, he fails to devise a comprehensive "semiotics of immigrant fiction" (208) that he promised in the introduction, although there are certain patterns and recurrent themes in the texts he covers.

The first chapter, entitled 'Slavs of New York', is devoted to Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* and Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. The premise that immigrant literature "needs more than ever these days to be contextualized, oriented to antecedent as well as contemporaneous expression" (27) is applied to his discussion of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* but could very well be illustrative of the book's scope. Indeed, as Cowart proves, *Being There* offers a contemporaneous counterpoint to Bellow's novel as it focuses on the opposite kind of protagonist: whereas Bellow's narrative deals with the experiences of the intellectual as a displaced person, in Kosinski's text Chance the Gardener becomes the perfect Everyman, the *tabula rasa* on which the immigrant experience is inscribed. Cowart's defence of Kosinski's novel, despite the author's questionable reputation,<sup>1</sup> is well-grounded, especially his discussion of the *simulacra* theories devised by Baudrillard and McLuhan, as well as his employment of Roland Barthes' distinction between the *readerly* and the *writerly*. Another interesting point in the analysis of this novel is the convergence with other books such as Roth's *Our Gang* and Don DeLillo's *Americana*, together with Andy Warhol's 1968 exhibition *In the Future Everyone will be World-famous for Fifteen Minutes*. In Bellow's novel Cowart interprets with lucidity the motif of Jewish immigrants,<sup>2</sup> essential to understand the diasporic existence of the intellectual immigrant Arthur Sammler. Particularly thought-provoking is Cowart's work on the similarities between Bellow's text and Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, as it accounts for key concepts such as double vision or impaired eye. Finally, Cowart explains at length Sammler's "loathing of the flesh" (35) alluding to Shakespeare's *Lear*, as Bellow's protagonist takes pain to come to terms with what he sees as America's obsession with sex.

The second chapter in the volume centers on Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, especially on the literary strategies used by Alvarez to foreground the Garcia family's troubled experience in America. Both the constant shift in narratorial perspective and the fragmented narrative help to illuminate the likewise fragmented subjectivities the book reveals. Moreover, Alvarez's novel stands for the quintessential immigrant experience, whereby immigration is seen as a return to childhood, or even a "second rebirth" (42). In the frequent 'epiphanies' of the text, Cowart maps out some of the features that could make for the immigrant universe: "the yearning for a return to the natal shore, an end to the furcation of identity" (45), or the use of words, accents, as shibboleths because accents represent national identity and belonging. By far, Cowart's

<sup>1</sup> Cowart makes reference to Kosinski's jet-setter life, dubious sexual practices and a *Village Voice* article exposing his reliance on ghostwriters due to his poor English (17-18).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Jewish immigrants constitute the paradigmatic diaspora, and William Safran explains its main features in his classic 'Comparing Diasporas: A Review Essay' (1999: 255).

most suggestive passages in this chapter capture the crucial role of the libido for Alvarez's female protagonists, as their sexual desire acts as potentially liberating but also damaging. Indeed, most of these women undergo psychotherapy and the only one who actually succeeds is the one who pursues her creativity.

The third chapter, aptly titled 'Survival on the Tangled Bank', compares Ursula Hegi's *The Vision of Emma Blau* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. As Cowart observes, while Hegi "critiques the American Dream . . . Mukherjee critiques the American penchant for the peripatetic" (57). In both cases the protagonist seems to embody the figure of the *arriviste* who justifies his/her behavior on the grounds of the myth of immigrant success. In Hegi's novel the adoption of a mixture between realism and magical realism allows for the rewriting of family history, in which the typical story of immigrant hope and desire is hybridized to turn it into a redemptive tale. As Cowart argues, the only possibility for redemption of the materialistic impulse that seems to possess the Blau family is the emergence of an individual capable of artistic expression. Reflecting on the nature of immigrant desire and its manifold faces with Lacanian insight, Cowart investigates the obsessions that plague the characters, especially Stefan Blau, Emma's grandfather, in connection with the legacy of the Old World. Only by discarding that cursed inheritance and focusing on her artistic gifts can Emma be reborn to a new American self. But Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is probably the best example of what the author calls a "successful" American becoming. Although starting from the premise that immigration dictates "a thematics of disarticulation" (69), he proceeds to explain the way in which the novel's protagonist emblemizes an empowered American identity. Its protagonist can eventually repudiate her two-facedness to embrace her new nation, but she cannot get rid of her Indian heritage. On the contrary, she is able to use it to her advantage, as the concept of Hindu fluidity and Indian mythology continually intersect with her American life. Cowart makes much of this specular element in the novel that, in fact, facilitates the protagonist's passage to the New World. Last but not least, Cowart's incisive comments on language actually reinforce the sense of fluidity that presides over the narrative.

In chapter four, 'Language, Dreams, and Art in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*', the author provides some more useful insights into the ways in which language and art subsume immigrants' hyphenated identities. The chapter tackles the issue of narrative fragmentation as a characteristic of immigrant fiction in order to enhance other typical features such as the generational conflict or the divergent value system between Cuba and the new homeland. Indeed, Garcia invests a great deal in forging a "sympathetic—and subversively gendered—picture of the lost homeland" (88). Garcia also effects another turn of the screw in the conventional immigrant story, since it is the older generation, the mother, who is assimilated into American culture while the daughter idealizes Cuba. But the part of this chapter devoted to the multiple languages in the novel, among them the language of dreams, is brilliant. Cowart contends that these languages resemble poetic language and, indeed, he resorts to Federico García Lorca's and Wallace Stevens's poetry. By using one of the characters, Pilar, as authorial surrogate, the author questions the American immigration myth embodied by the Statue of Liberty by drawing an unconventional painting that foregrounds the interconnection between old and new nations.

Chapter Five, under the title of 'Korean' connection', mainly analyzes Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Native Speaker* (1995), together with Keller's *Comfort Woman* from the point of view of "flawed immigrants", in Cowart's words, "expelled or fleeing from places where they have committed sins of varying originality" (101). In his detailed close reading of *A Gesture Life* and *Comfort Woman*, Cowart builds a challenging case for the construction of an immigrant self which has to come to terms with constant images of dismemberment and disarticulation. Cowart highlights the subtle reframing of the idea of the melting pot, as well as these immigrants' complicity in acts of victimization in a previous life. Particularly enlightening is his study of Lee's first novel, *Native Speaker*, where he puns on the figure of the immigrant as a spy. Embodying the paradox of double consciousness, the protagonist fluctuates between Korean and American identities negotiating the "difficulty to separate nature from nurture in the realm of ethnic identity" (108), and thus the constant need for identity simulacra. Cowart compares it with the novel *Poet Game* by the Iranian American Salar Abdoh, which is an espionage novel, suggesting that both share the sense of a multilayered paranoia common to both spies and immigrants. Furthermore, *Native Speaker* is revealed as a compelling rewriting of Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men*, which subtly subverts the usual politics of identity, making it coincide with the politics of politics. Taking into account the Oedipal or Confucian conflicts, Cowart's perceptive analysis emphasizes a doomed vision of hybridity while simultaneously allowing for the protagonist to become a Korean American 'catcher in the rye'.

The Haitian perspective in Edwige Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is the object of study of chapter six. This chapter also starts from the premise of *diasporic doubleness* but, in this case, due to the remembrance of a prior experience of psychic unity. Following DuBois' double consciousness theory, Danticat meditates on the survival of the old traits of a pre-immigrant, pre-American self. Cowart aptly interrogates the dynamic images of rootedness, transplantation and flourishing that pervade the text. The author scrutinizes key notions such as the allegiance to one's native country or the different sense of space in the old and new countries. But he pays especial attention to the way in which this tendency to shift the focus to the homeland is a byproduct of the commodification of ethnic past and identity. The identification between women's suffering and the country's violation leads to his contention of the doubling that is required of each Haitian woman. Highlighting the physical and psychological bondage of these women, he fails to provide an in-depth study of the reasons that may explain the cult of virginity and the constant 'tests' to which women are subjected. Although he points in the right direction of patriarchal imposition and its terrible psychological burden for women, he forgets a feminist reading that could show the multilayered nature of Haitian women's suffering.

'Assimilation and Adolescence' in chapter 7 connects Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* with Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* by analyzing the passage from adolescence to adulthood of the female protagonists. In both cases this passage implies a rebellion against the mother figure and the new land, although in Kincaid's novel Lucy is able to register continuity between British colonialism and North American imperialism, and in Cao's novel there is a certain rehearsal of the model minority myth. He provides an interesting but rather problematic reading of Lucy as an angry young woman who is nasty and unattractive

on purpose. Depicting Lucy as a young rebel without a cause certainly misses some of the crucial points Kincaid makes about the effects of colonial legacy or feminist claims. On the contrary, Cowart's study of Cao's novel is endowed with positive connotations insofar as *Monkey Bridge* narrates a much more successful tale of immigrant physical and spiritual renewal. The novel's analysis is tied to a vision of immigrants as the individual talent in Eliot's famous essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1920): as the immigrant changes America, the immigrant writer must find his/her place in American tradition. Exploring notions of Vietnamese topography and body, the author concentrates on the Confucian influence on the search for the father/grandfather figure which leads to a search for lost heritage. Cowart's consistent rendition of the return of the repressed history as part of the immigrant experience acknowledges, nevertheless, the difficulties of immigration as an endless possibility for reinvention and rebirth.

In 'Ethnicity as Penitence' (chapter 8) Cowart takes advantage of another 'flawed immigrant', in this case the son of Dutch collaborators with the Nazi regime who is literally "a prisoner of his past" (161) in Mylène Dressler's *The Deadwood Beetle*. Applying Werner Sollor's theory of the *consent* and *descent* models, Cowart accounts for the protagonist's sense of failure as husband, father and brother basing it on his guilty conscience as a son. The analysis further underlines the performativity, not only of identity, but also of nationality, especially when the protagonist is defined as the eternal outsider. Expanding the Kafkaesque conceit, Cowart contends that Dressler uses insect metaphors in order to bring home the fact that his character lacks both reliability and humanity. Focusing on the play of parallels among characters and incidents, the author convincingly argues for a reading of mimicry as an enabling strategy to facilitate immigrants' assimilation. Moreover, a Freudian perspective substantiates the description of immigrants immersed in the yearning for a prior state to immigration. Cowart also finds the notion of redemption in Dressler's novel in his protagonist's ability to love and care about others.

The next chapter, 'Immigration as *Bardo*', deals with the theme of a doomed self in Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree*. The chapter takes up the issue of the problematic sense of immigrant identity represented by a brother's inability for duality and a sister's double consciousness on the eve of their deaths. Displaying his impressive command of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Cowart articulates Burma, the homeland, as an imprisoned land, and the immigrant soul on its journey (or *Bardo*) to reincarnation is able to distinguish between the spiritual and the worldly realms. The author also addresses the different use of the trope of nostalgia in exile and immigration novels, to articulate the way in which Law-Yone scorns nostalgia in order to foster her characters' acculturation. The other concept explored by Cowart in the novel is that of immigrants as space travellers but also as mad people who must experience lunacy in order to overcome nostalgia. Following the Tibetan doctrine, "every immigrant undergoes a death" (182) to be reincarnated as a new citizen.

Finally, the last chapter proposes an accurate reading of Junot Díaz's *Brown*. The author starts by acknowledging that all the writers chosen for the study are "atypical immigrants" (190). Cowart further argues that Díaz also belongs here since his collection of short stories based on the experiences of Dominican Americans subverts the parameters of race, class, identity, and heterosexuality despite the actual

dramatisation of the 'thematics of absence' present in any immigrant fiction. The critic draws a convincing study of the meaning ascribed to closeted homosexuality as a symbol of the debunking of machismo, but also of immigrant experience itself. Concerned with the internalization of racial discrimination both in America and the Dominican Republic, Díaz invests a great deal in mixed ethnicity as a means to preserve some kind of dignity. After a careful and detailed description of the text, Cowart eventually asserts that for Díaz immigrants bear a blemish or "the mask of embattled subjectivity" (204), and also a tenuous connection to the new country, a somehow disappointing end for the critic's otherwise excellent discussion of the text.

Therefore, Cowart's volume undoubtedly contributes to the study of immigrant fiction, as it offers new and fresh insights into an impressive range of immigrant texts and their multiple formal strategies to represent the immigrant plight in search for personal and collective sense of identity and national belonging. Despite the lack of a unified sense of immigrant semiotics, Cowart's perceptive and nuanced analysis of the texts recreates highly intertextual connections that sustain a vision of immigrant literature's literary qualities and its long-lasting contribution to the making of American contemporary literature and, concurrently, to the making of the American nation.

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