

Sabine Doff and Frank Schulze-Engler, eds. *Beyond "Other Cultures". Transcultural Perspectives on Teaching the New Literatures in English*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011.

For many years now, what learners of English as a foreign language in German-speaking countries have been expected to learn comprises a bundle of skills and attitudes, usually referred to as 'intercultural competence,' which includes respect and tolerance in the face of cultural difference, cross-cultural communication and an awareness of stereotypes and prejudices. This ambitious set of skills is rather ill-defined in most curricula at secondary level, but has developed a broad theoretical and pedagogical basis, drawing jointly on cultural theories, on general pedagogical research, and on foreign language pedagogy. Literary texts that center on issues of cultural alterity have been suggested for EFL classrooms, the aim being to make learners of English aware of the negotiation of cultural identities and of cultural difference. Whether under the name of *Fremdverstehen*, intercultural competence or intercultural learning, the basic premise of these approaches is a recognition of self and other, an identification of the learner's 'own culture' as opposed to his/her 'other culture,' often in connection with an unquestioned view of culture as national culture. Over the years, the various suggestions for teaching culture have gradually changed

and made way for more dialogic notions of self and other, but cultural alterity still seems to be the overriding principle of mainstream intercultural teaching approaches.

This is the premise on which this very timely collection, edited by Sabine Doff and Frank Schulze-Engler, and their suggestion of "Transcultural Perspectives on the New Literatures in English" bases its suggestion of transcultural learning through and with the New Literatures in English. In their introduction, a well-argued rationale for a transcultural approach, the editors question the usefulness of the concept of cultural alterity and 'other cultures,' on the following grounds:

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. (1)

Their scepticism is based on both theoretical and pedagogical arguments: classrooms today are rarely 'monocultural' environments, so that the borders between what might be intuited as students' 'own' cultures and the 'other' culture are blurred to start with. In addition, globalisation processes impinge on society in such a way that a clear cut between features that 'belong' to one culture rather than another can no longer be made. This is not just convincing on an intuitive level, but it is also supported by recent research into cultural theory. The approach to teaching culture(s) clearly hinges on the way 'culture' is understood and made operative. Following cultural theorists such as James Clifford, Paul Gilroy, Edward Said, Ulf Hannerz and Wolfgang Welsch, culture is here understood as "an open and fluid cluster of different individual cultural practices" (7) rather than monolithic units that can be labelled, often as a national culture, and compared and contrasted with one another. Such an open view of culture necessitates a reconsideration of learning aims: rather than learning about individual cultures, learners are expected to learn about culture, i.e. about cultural formations, cultural clusters and cultural signification processes. Such a view also impacts on the position of the learner, and here the editors come forward with two extremely interesting points, one terminological, the other pedagogical: they suggest talking about and teaching "cultural clusters" (7) rather than "cultures" that can be counted, and they locate a more active, performative understanding of culture within a pedagogy of empowerment, which is especially relevant for diversified classrooms (7). It is a pity that these promising suggestions are not fleshed out but relegated to footnotes. They would be worth pursuing in detail.

The increasing awareness of a deterritorialised notion of culture has gone hand in hand with a deterritorialisation of the New Literatures in English themselves, which are characterised as being more and more part of a global cultural network that encompasses the English-speaking world, rather than constituting bodies of national literature. This characteristic, together with issues of hybridity and multilingualism, according to the editors, makes these texts so conducive to transcultural learning.

With this introduction, the editors prepare the ground for a collection of essays which predominantly focus on one individual texts or writers and offer suggestions for teaching that adhere more or less to the transcultural paradigm laid out in the introduction. While on the surface all contributors subscribe to a transcultural approach, some refer to cultures or cultural identities in a way that would not be compatible with an understanding of culture as "cultural clusters." One contributor even reiterates the *Fremdverstehen*-principles in a way that we have seen many times before (and not

been convinced) and fails to demarcate where the transcultural approach takes over from the dated binary of self and other.

As can be expected in such a collection, the essays differ considerably in the quality of their teaching suggestions and pedagogical framing, a few just patching a handful of pedagogical points to what is basically a close reading of a text. The majority of contributors is based in Germany, with only three international contributors, Bill Ashcroft being the most prominent, and the references point towards a distinctly German foreign language pedagogy. If such a focus was intended by the editors, this might have been explained, otherwise it seems a rather parochial selection.

To me, what makes this collection worth reading is the introductory essay by Doff and Schulze-Engler and the way in which the following essays adhere (or refuse to do so) to the transcultural paradigm that is so well laid out. As its own dialogic (if not transcultural) engagement with transcultural learning, the volume is an important contribution to a developing body of work produced in this field.