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Nichole Coleman. The Right to Difference: Interculturality and Human Rights in Contemporary German Literature. University of Michigan Press, 2021.

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Abstract

Review of Nichole Coleman. The Right to Difference: Interculturality and Human Rights in Contemporary German Literature. University of Michigan Press, 2021. 270 pp.

Keywords

literature, universalism, interculturality, diversity, human rights

Nichole Coleman. *The Right to Difference: Interculturality and Human Rights in Contemporary German Literature*. University of Michigan Press, 2021. 270 pp.

Genocide and human rights violations have become of central concern in German Studies, considering the important role Holocaust Studies plays in the discipline. And interest in these topics has only increased alongside the recognition of colonial conflicts (for example, the genocide of the Nama and Herero) and as Germany becomes radically diverse thanks to immigrants from conflict areas (such as from Bosnia in the 1990s and Syria in the 2010s). In *The Right to Difference*, Nichole Coleman's central questions are, how and why does violence develop between two closely related groups and how is difference weaponized to justify violence? To counter these social problems, Coleman argues that literature can be a saving grace due to its ability to teach people empathy.

Coleman analyzes several novels about ethnic difference and violence. It is refreshing that rather than taking a binary approach, she includes novels by ethnic Germans, by People of Color authors who were born in or immigrated to Germany, and by German speakers who live in the diaspora. Instead of dividing the books based on the authors' ethnicity or citizenship, she divides them thematically into books where difference is used as a justification for violence and books that show how the construction and perception of difference operate. The novels she discusses are Günter Grass's *Unkenrufe* (*Call of the Toad*), Sabrina Janesch's *Katzenberge* ('Cat Hills'), Abbas Khider's *Die Orangen des Präsidenten* ('The President's Oranges'), Nicol Ljubic's *Meeresstille* (*The Stillness of the Sea*), Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* (*The Hunger Angel*), Bernard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*), Shida Bayzar's *Nachts ist es leise in Tehran* ('Nights are Quiet in Tehran'), and Jenny Erpenback's *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (*Go, Went, Gone*).

One of the refreshing things about Coleman's book is that she not only offers close textual analysis of literature, but also considers how her arguments have ramifications for German Studies as a discipline. Coleman asks readers to consider how teaching these novels can help us frame German Studies in a more inclusive manner; thus, she engages with important questions that have been raised in recent years by groups like Diversity, Decolonization and the German Curriculum Collective. Coleman asserts it is our responsibility as instructors to include such literature in our classes to help students "reflect on the consequences of historic crimes and the continued presence of oppressive structures in society and in classrooms" (5). For example, Coleman proposes the term "ethical reading" to describe how "a novel allows the reader to ponder moral questions" (69). It's inspiring to have someone contemplate how their scholarship impacts both research and pedagogy. This approach resists artificial divisions that have long dominated our field, such as that between language instruction and the study of culture or between politics and aesthetics.

I also find it laudable that Coleman is at times critical of the literature she discusses. She rightly criticizes *The Reader* for focusing more on intergenerational difference than the victimization of Jews. She criticizes *Go, Went, Gone* for Erpenbeck's universalist attempt to compare African refugees with marginalized Germans, in a naïve assertion of a common humanity that isn't actually recognized in Germany today. Likewise, Coleman suggests readers push back against Khider's universalizing depiction of the experience of political prisoners by not uncritically accepting his comparisons between victims of the Holocaust and victims of the Iraqi regime.

Coleman's book can be considered as consisting of two parts. In the introduction and chapter one, she engages with different theories of difference in order to find a way for interculturality to create empathy and enable us to live together. Coleman acknowledges that there are some differences in a society that people consider harder or even impossible to overcome: race, ethnicity, and religion are some of them. She considers how we can think of adapting to a culture and a host country changing along with its residents, which is why her approach invokes Max Czollek's argument for viewing Germany as a place of "radical diversity." Coleman proposes a five-step approach to how people deal with difference: cultural ignorance, cultural exclusion, universalism, autocultural reflexivity, and interculturality. In the second half of the book, she performs close analyses of each text.

One question that is not consistently asked throughout the book is, what is the effect of telling a story *in German* about violence that was committed elsewhere, by non-Germans—for example, the Bosnian war or a political prisoner in Iraq? Coleman briefly mentions the unique context of the Bosnian war vis-à-vis Ljubic's novel, commenting that Germans literally do not necessarily have the words to discuss the Bosnian genocide. And when discussing Khider's novel, which depicts the torture of political prisoners in Iraq, she goes into greater detail about language, commenting on how Khider universalizes the experience of the Iraqi prisoners by drawing parallels to the German historical context and using German words and German frames of reference. Arguably, this is an observation that should have been made about any of the novels addressing historical events outside of Germany. What does writing in German do for the author? How does writing in German potentially change the story or mediate how Germans receive the story? Here it would be useful for Coleman to tie a reflection on language in with her pedagogical questions. What would American students learn or experience from reading this novel in German rather than in English?

The Right to Difference would be of interest to anyone working on empathy, multiculturalism and postcolonialism. The first chapter is especially useful for giving literary examples of Coleman's five categories of interculturality, which would make it particularly fitting for a graduate seminar. Coleman's study may also

be of interest to people interested in abolitionism, as chapter two looks at the prison and concentration camp as a potentially equalizing liminal space where prisoners' very presence allows those of authority to question the prisoners' humanity. What could have been fruitful here is if Coleman still considered how intersecting oppressions might create hierarchies among prisoners in this liminal space. For example, how might Leo's homosexuality in *The Hunger Angel* have impacted his experience in prison?

Coleman's argument about why literary texts matter is especially pertinent in today's climate, where so many foreign language departments are under attack. She demonstrates how we as instructors can engage students with literary texts in a way that emphasizes why literature is unique and helps students draw connections to matters that concern them outside the classroom.

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