Since she graduated in BA studies at our department with her excellent thesis on “Migrant Experience in Contemporary Black British Fiction” Veronika Vitková has maintained a steadfast interest in postcolonial issues and so-called “new literatures”. Her experience and erudition flowered during her MA studies and resulted in the submitted MA dissertation – a text immensely insightful and useful for anybody interested in similar topics. Veronika Vitková has chosen to work on writers who are truly contemporary: all the works analysed in her dissertation have been published in the last dozen years. With little critical work done so far, she had to work independently of any established opinion, create her own thematic trajectories and lines of connection. I dare say, she has been very successful in this endeavor and produced a piece of original critical analysis, unprecedented in its scope and theme.

Allowing the texts to speak for themselves first, she did not attempt to twist the text to fit theoretical straitjackets. Yet, interpretation is not at the cost of theory – all her opinions are underpinned by an array of theoretical considerations (which she clearly defines at the outset: from writing back, to bodymemory etc.) as she ultimately positions her writers “on the continuum” between Spivak and Bhabha.

The dissertation has a clear logical structure (I appreciate the chapter summaries, whichvaluably bring together the network of issues discussed, and generalize them). She argues persuasively and nearly always in flawless English and serious academic idiom. Consequently, she produces a text which is a pleasure to read and easy to find one’s way in. The list of sources both primary and secondary is definitely above average for a work on MA level. And, most valuably, the women writers selected, though actually a result of several coincidences, form an excellent sample. (Only one small point about the layout of the poems: I believe the text would have been even more reader-friendly had the longer verses – three and more - been reproduced as laid out in the book.)

I have no serious critical comments and very few questions:

1. On page 59, Ms Vitková claims that slave narratives were written by men and thus women’s perspective was written out. Although it is indeed true that the story of Frederick Douglass is taken as the canonical tale, there are quite a few narratives authored by women. By now a classic of (Afro-)American literature is Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs. OUP published Six women’s slave narratives starting with the first female slave narrative from the Americas, The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. (Of interest may be the fact, that prof Henry Louis Gates Jr. recently discovered, at an auction, a manuscript of a semi-fictional work, more novel than memoir, from the 1850s, The Bondwoman’s Tale. It was published with great success in 2002.) Nevertheless, Ms Vitková is right in the context of the British West Indies – with the exception of Mary Prince, all the above mentioned texts come from the US.)
2. Writing back is a process of recovering suppressed/erased discourses/voices. Consequently, the recovery of such lost voices subverts the hegemony of the silencing discourse. Bhabha’s theories are used to underpin this claim. How does, according to Bhabha, mimicry and hybridity subvert colonial discourse?

3. Connected to this is the issue of Spivak’s silent subaltern (the topic of chapter 2.3 on postcolonial feminism). The problem in Spivak’s essay is actually even broader: It is a critique of the representation of human subjectivity in a variety of contexts (not only with reference to the work of Subaltern Studies scholars). Spivak turns first to the work of poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze who have challenged the notion that human individuals are sovereign subjects with autonomous agency over their consciousness (as in e.g. I think therefore I am). As poststructuralism would have it, human consciousness is constructed discursively. Our subjectivity is constituted by the shifting discourses of power which speak though us, situating us here and there in particular positions and relations. In these terms, we do not construct out own identities, the subject is not sovereign over the construction of selfhood. The subject is de-centred, its consciousness is constructed from positions outside itself. So, Spivak argues that, surprisingly for Foucault and Deleuze, when they talk about oppressed groups such as the working class, they fall back into notions of sovereign subject: they are guilty of “a clandestine restoration of subjective essentialism”. Plus, they assume that the writing of intellectuals such as themselves can serve as a medium through which the voices of the repressed can be represented. Then she makes her points about the subalterns, and concludes that rather than making the subaltern as female seem to speak, intellectuals must bring to crisis the representational systems which rendered her mute in the first place. (Still more about this in Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts.) And this results in my question: It seems that here Bhabha and Spivak may meet – How do the texts subvert hegemonic discourse (my first question in point 2)? And: How do the texts bring to crisis established representational systems?

I recommend the dissertation for defence with the preliminary mark excellent. (Doporučuji k obhajobě s předběžným hodnocením výborně.)

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