

PARTING THE MORMON VEIL. PHYLLIS BARBER'S WRITING
ÁNGEL CHAPARRO SAINZ.

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It is always a pleasure to review a new book from the Javier Coy Series (firmly edited by Carme Manuel Cuenca), especially since the collection has already published more than one hundred titles; to celebrate such an unusual feat in Spanish academia, number 100 was *Retorno a la historia literaria norteamericana. Itinerarios críticos y pegáticos*, a collection of essays by one the Founding Fathers of U.S. Studies in Spain: Félix Martín Gutiérrez.

Likewise, it is also a pleasure to review this critical work by Ángel Chaparro Sainz, a member of a new generation of scholars from the University of the Basque Country who –under the supervision of David Rio Raigadas– has trodden new paths in the field of Western Studies over the last decade.

In this insightful volume, Chaparro Sainz brings to the fore one of the many aspects of the West which was neglected when the critical paradigm of the ‘Old West’ ruled: Mormon Studies. Mormonism is a religious creed which, even today, remains largely unknown and subject to misperception and stereotyping, despite the undeniable visibility provided in recent years by presidential candidate Mitt Romney, the TV show *Big Love* or –even– the musical *The Book of Mormon*.

As he underscores several times, the main goal of this detailed study is to give due recognition not only to the work of Phyllis Barber (Nevada, 1950), but to Mormon literature in general. These pioneering pages unveil a whole new body of writing for the very first time in Spain, thus opening up a wide field of inquiry for future researchers.

The volume includes a brief but illuminating “Foreword” penned by Phyllis Barber herself, who is humble enough to admit that reading this critical work has allowed her “to see, apprehend, and even appreciate, the disparate aspects of myself that have been brought into a clearer light” (16).

The book, written in an exuberant and personal prose unusual in literary criticism, opens with an introduction to both Mormon history and Mormon literature which is extremely useful for those of us who are ‘outsiders,’ to borrow the term the author of *Parting the Mormon Veil* uses to describe his approach. Next, there is an

overview of Phyllis Barber's career in which Chaparro sets up a close relationship with the author he has devoted several years of his life to study.

He shows his mastery of the subject and his intellectual maturity when he wisely decides to structure his study around four main themes which recur in the texts Barber has published so far: two memoirs (*How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, 1994; *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, 2009), two short-story collections (*The School of Love*, 1990; *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, 1999) and one novel (*And the Desert Shall Blossom*, 1991), plus two books for children.

The first one is, quite predictably in a Mormon artist, the theme of religion. Throughout this chapter, Chaparro convincingly demonstrates his hypothesis that "it is impossible to approach Barber's fiction without taking into account the fact that she is –or was– a Mormon" (74); he rightly compares the influence of religion in her work to that of Catholicism in another female author who also developed a unique voice: Flannery O'Connor. Even though Barber's relationship with Mormonism has been deeply ambivalent, its presence is always felt in her texts, either as a "joy" or as a "deception" (75). Especially problematic is the discovery of the female body, which holds so many secrets that discourses of power have always tried to suppress. The human body becomes a symbolic element of contention in Barber's fictions and also in her memoirs, as when she recalls her joining in high school a group called The Rhythmettes as a way to get to know her own body and to express her emotions. Chaparro explains that, as the title of this book indicates, the veil functions as a major symbolic element for Mormons, the very same metaphor W.E.B. Dubois had used to describe the African American condition in his seminal essay *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

The second theme studied is equally complex: gender. The analysis starts by noting the paradox that in a community as patriarchal as Mormonism, there is a surprisingly high number of female novelists. Barber's texts scrutinize from a critical angle the three restrictive roles established for women (daughters, mothers, sisters) in a community traditionally linked to polygamy. Maybe because he is a male critic, Ángel Chaparro does not restrict his views on gender to the female presence, but also offers a lucid analysis of how males are portrayed in Barber's texts, paying special attention to the characters of Alf and Herbert Jensen (father and son) in her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. In addition, he explores how the father-daughter relationship unfolds in Phyllis Barber. The last pages of this section on gender are devoted to exploring sexuality in depth, a thorny topic according to Chaparro, since "these women's sexual independence and emotional emancipation always involve some kind of intimate loss or hurt. Sex is often presented as something disturbing . . . sex is a source of potential danger and disruption" (165).

Place is the subject explored in the third section, which unavoidably evolves around the key concept of the West, here perceived as a rhizomatic and fluid space, following the influential poststructuralist theories of British critic Neil Campbell.

These might possibly be the most illuminating pages of the book, since Chaparro does manage to reveal here how the works of Phyllis Barber unveil a highly original approach to the West presented from a female point of view and, as a result, subverting centuries of the male gaze, especially hegemonic in most Western films. A subsection entitled “City of Las Vegas: Behind Fremont Street” includes a fascinating analysis of how Barber’s texts respond to a long male tradition of works about that mythical Nevada city which includes names like Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Robert Laxalt, or –rather surprisingly– Mario Puzo. One might even add a male film director, Francis Ford Coppola, who in his vastly underrated *One from the Heart* (1982) did offer some of the most memorable images of Las Vegas nightlife. By means of a very detailed reading, Chaparro amply proves that “[t]hrough her heterogenous rendition of the city, Barber accomplishes a complete image that presents a wholesome, complex image of Las Vegas” (185). Additionally, he also delves into other unique locations of the West which bear great metaphorical significance like the desert, which functions as “the reverse of the city” (190), or Boulder City and the Dam. This solid analysis of how place operates in Barber’s texts –in which the presence of Native Americans is slightly muted– seems to confirm the validity of Gloria Anzaldúa’s classic concept of ‘the borderlands’ to conceptualize the West as a hybrid and multilayered space.

The last section deals with Art, especially music, since Phyllis Barber is a classically-trained pianist whose prose is, therefore, deeply influenced by musical elements: rhythm operates as a defining element in all of her works. Ángel Chaparro, who has a vast musical knowledge and in recent years has introduced popular music in U.S. Studies in Spanish academia, includes in his book references to artists like Jerry Garcia, Eddie Vedder, The Killers, Willy Vlautin, or the Spaniard Nacho Vegas. In these final pages he carries out a careful analysis of the main stylistic features of Barber’s prose, among them “short paragraphs, the rhyming of words, the employment of questions, the visual details . . . or the poetic images” (250). One can only wonder if such a brilliant formal reading should not have been placed earlier in the book.

In the Conclusion, the author neatly connects all the main issues he has previously explored, and stresses that Phyllis Barber’s writing fits into the postmodernist aesthetics. He also regrets that in the religious component of her writing “lies one of the main obstacles to the enjoyment and understanding of Barber’s fiction for those of us who are outsiders to Mormon culture” (258).

The volume ends with a generous Bibliography which explains why Chaparro’s critical inquiry is so rich and multifaceted. Crucial names both on ‘the New West’ (R. White, P. Nelson Limerick, S. Slovic, Ch. Gloftelty), and on feminist theory (N. Chodorow, A. Rich, L. Mulvey, H. Cixous) are all listed here, together with the leading authorities on Mormon Studies. It is worth remarking that web pages have been used as well (especially to obtain data about the Mormon Church),

proving once more that nowadays internet has become an invaluable source of information for researchers in any field.

To sum up, the Javier Coy Series offers yet another modelic example of Spanish academic scholarship in *Parting the Mormon Veil. Phyllis Barber's Writing*. Ángel Chaparro Sainz proves to be a researcher whose command of the neverending intricacies of the West, Mormonism and, of course, Phyllis Barber is unquestionable. The field of 'the New West' keeps regenerating itself in the new millenium thanks to the contributions of young scholars like Ángel Chaparro Sainz.

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