

**ADDRESSING THE ASIAN DIASPORA:  
ENCOUNTERS: PEOPLE OF ASIAN DESCENT IN THE AMERICAS.**

Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Rajini Srikanth, and Leny Mendoza Strobel (eds.)  
Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.

**IDENTIDAD ÉTNICA Y GÉNERO EN LA NARRATIVA DE ESCRITORAS CHINOAMERICANAS.**

Begoña Simal González

La Coruña: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de La Coruña, 2000.

**NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES: AN INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING.**

Helena Grice

Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002.

**THE CHUTNEYFICATION OF HISTORY: SALMAN RUSHDIE, MICHAEL ONDAATJE, BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND THE POSTCOLONIAL DEBATE.**

Mita Benerjee

Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002.

(by Rocío G. Davis. University of Navarra)

Some of the most creatively innovative and critically challenging writing of the past few decades is arguably the literature of the diasporas, the domain of transcultural and transnational identity politics and poetics. The fact of globalization has radically expanded the study of modern diasporas, creating the opportunity for plurality, and for a new kind of literature, that engages the story of diaspora on both a socio-cultural and aesthetic level. The texts I will analyze in this review, in different ways, prove how the transcultural subject's engagement with cultural production necessarily limns oftentimes problematic classifications such as *exilic*, *ethnic*, or *immigrant*, which do not do justice to the nuances of writing between histories, geographies, and cultural practices. Many of these texts explore the paradigms for understanding the relationship between displacement, languages, history, memory, and borders, as parameters of self-identification and self-representation. Diasporic literatures remind us that culture is, ultimately, a dialogue, and that the artifacts produced by subjects located in diasporic positions signify substantially on a discursive level. Specifically, the cultural production of the Asian diaspora has been obliging critics to revise some of the previously uncontested paradigms of postmodernism, ethnic studies, and postcolonialism, and re-negotiate the broader cultural history of Asian immigration. Intimately connected to cultural memory, it provides a translation of semiotic behavior of dislocation and resettlement, offering renewed versions of the phenomenological

reality of the Asian immigrant and subsequent generations. In a broad sense, diasporic narratives represent a conscious effort to transmit a linguistic and cultural heritage and difference through acts of personal and collective memory, filtered through the prism of fiction or negotiated through a variety of art forms. These texts demonstrate the increasing multilayeredness of the transcultural experience, deploying the issues facing deterritorialized cultures in their act of self-representation.

The paradigms of ethnic writing and criticism in the United States, whose critical attention has grown immensely since the 1960s, provide an interesting point of departure for approaches to diasporic writing in the Americas and in Europe. Importantly, the form of writing addresses the missing links in history and fills in the blanks in America's and Europe's writing about itself. Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, in her introduction to *Encounters*, argues that the anthology strives to reflect "the reality of our experiences in the Americas where we live our lives in the context of multiple societies and communities", rather than focus primarily on issues of interaction with economic and political groups. Clearly, the investigation of textual constructions and cultural affiliations that shape the notion of the diasporic subject calls for a nuanced reading of the interdisciplinary production of these people. This highly original and fascinating anthology thus foregrounds the multiple spaces and positions that the diasporic Asians occupy in the Americas, by incorporating the creative and critical writing that privileges the social and political spaces where cultures interact, and literature as an institution of cultural memory. *Encounters* provides a multifaceted comparative and theoretical framework that is not only highly innovative, but which is a valuable contribution to diaspora studies because of the organic perspective it offers of the processes of diaspora and adaptation, as well as of creative engagements with questions of authenticity and belonging. Moreover, the polyphony of texts in the anthology —by established writers and critics as well as emerging voices— stresses the dialogic nature of contemporary incursions into the meaning of the diaspora and the literature that arises from that experience.

The anthology features a combination of creative writing (poetry, drama, and fiction), personal essays, and critical articles that play against each other to create a multifaceted version of the diaspora story. The first part, "In Search of my Ombigo —Locating the Family" details diverse itineraries of personal identity and self-formation, often using bilingualism to creatively illustrate the role of languages in the struggle for selfhood. On some occasions, hybridity or cultural syncretism is the result of the process of reflection. Reproduction of visual art by Kay Reiko Torres and Tomoyo Hiroishi attest to this blend. Hiroishi's woodblock, entitled "La Búsqueda de la Identidad —In Search of My Identity", features a shelf with both

traditional Mexican and Japanese masks, and which suggests the choice she has to make, and the synthesis she arrives at. Leny Mendoza Strobel's personal account, "Dreaming All the Way Home," outlines her process of "de-colonization", and how dream images of ancestors and cultural past configured her inner landscape and led to her particular manner of forging a future. Three essays focus on Asian-Hispanic subjects: Monica Cinco Basurto, Lok C.D. Siu and Stephanie Li engage the cultural mix of Chinese immigrants in Mexican and Panamanian settings. Li's "In Search of My Ombligo", for example, tells of her Chinese American father's marriage to her Mexican mother—a wedding that included a mariachi band and the reception at a Chinese restaurant. Kathryn Jeun Cho's piece, "The Boy Under the Bridge", recounts her Korean family's odyssey to the United States, passing through Brazil, sustained by her father's idea of the American Dream. Aly Remtulla's poem, "We Sail Across Memories" subtly pinpoints the nature of the diasporic journey, and the heritage of its subjects.

The second section, "The Politics of Cool—Locating a Community" expands the arena of creative and critical concern, to negotiate the ethnic encounters of, among others, Japanese Peruvians, Chinese in Cuba, Okinawan immigrants in Bolivia, and Black Korea. Interestingly, two essays focus on the influence of African American youth culture and music on Asian groups: Sunaina Maira's essay, "The Politics of 'Cool': Indian American Youth Culture in New York City" is a fascinating explanation of the cultural permutations and hybridity of Indian Americans who increasingly identify with African American youth culture and the way this intersects with issues of class and gender politics; likewise, Janet Shirley's "The Story of Double R" also shows the influence of black culture through the story of a Filipino American youth's involvement with gangs and drugs. The final section, "Volcán de Izalco, amén—Locating the Body and the Land" opens with Dwight Okita's poem on being Asian American, how "As I child, I was a fussy eater / and I would separate the yolk from the egg white / as I now try to sort out what is Asian / in me from what is American—", realizing that "countries are not / like eggs—except in the fragileness / of their shells". The poems, essays and photographs in this section negotiate the development of a racialized consciousness within the landscape of the country they inhabit, and how preestablished categories of racial classification are not necessarily part of each subject's process of self-identification. On the contrary, the essays, stories, and poems repeatedly suggest the necessity of challenging stereotypical notions of the characteristics of Asian allegiances, and point to highly original itineraries of selfhood and cultural affiliation.

Rustomji-Kerns, quoting Walton Look Lai, privileges in the formulation of the central issues of the anthology, the idea of "an Hemispheric consciousness... as an

intellectual notion” to address how people from Asia in the Americas “define Asia for themselves and for the communities they live in, and how they describe their connections or lack of connections to Asia and recognize their own roles and the role of Asia in the American, especially in relation to the roles of others whose participation in the settling or the unsettling of the Americas has been barely acknowledged, denied, relegated to obscurity or denigrated.” The three sections — focusing on family, community, and the land— highlight key issues in the development of both diasporic consciousness and transcultural affiliations: processes which are highly individual but which stress what Karen Tei Yamashita, in the preface, describes as “the extended fabric of our connecting lives across nations, cultures, and histories”. By problematizing current premises about diasporic Asians, the volume as a whole challenges ideological preconceptions and suggests a revising of received theory, particularly with regard to the nature of the Asian presence in the Americas, and the mutual influences they exert in the places they inhabit.

The three other texts I will examine testify to the increasing significance of the literature of the Asian diaspora in the field of contemporary literature. Each of the books were published in different European countries —Spain, the U.K., and Germany— signaling a welcome growth of international critical interest. Begoña Simal’s study contributes significantly to the development of two areas in recent Spanish literary criticism: it offers both an introduction to emblematic female Chinese American writers, and engages in a discussion of ethnicity and gender theory. Her theoretically grounded study is a useful introduction to issues of race, ethnicity and gender, and well as of narrative strategies and the metaphors ethnic writers have appropriated to describe their lives and forms of living. Centering only on Chinese American writers allows the author to delve in detail into aspects of immigration history and racial encounters, as well as the dynamics of Chinatown, which figures prominently in several texts.

Simal’s choice of authors reflects her intention: to present a coherent outline of the most emblematic themes and narrative strategies used by writers to formulate the development of the consciousness of being Chinese American, as well as to explore the possibilities of defining that contested term. Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng, and Sigrid Nunez, in different ways, have marked the trajectory of Asian American narrative. Through a theoretically-informed reading of these writers’ texts, Simal elucidates the reasons why these texts have become seminal in the canon of Asian American literature. Her focus on language, for example, considers one of the central concerns of women writers. Insofar as culture is memory, it can be retrieved through symbolic action, and Simal highlights the use of language as a powerful tool for both cultural memory and empowerment. Language constructs personal, social, and literary identity, and the choice of silence

as a central theme in many of these texts, as well as Simal's privileging of this metaphor, signifies on several levels. The question of language choice, as well as the possibility or necessity of moving beyond language, is a constant in Asian American literature. Silence becomes as powerful a form of discourse as words. In this regard, we see her debt to King-kok Cheung's 1993 study, *Articulate Silences*. Nonetheless, Simal takes Cheung's arguments a step further by engaging ethnicity and gender, making the texts dialogue with recent theory. Also, her incursion into the terrain of the in-between—the question of “either/or, both/and” can apply to discussions of other ethnic literatures as well. Notable are her detailed and intelligent readings of each of the texts—particularly that of Ng's *Bone*—and her negotiation of the nuances of ethnic and gendered discourse.

For professors of ethnic studies in Spain, Simal's study serves as a useful tool for graduate courses on Asian American literature, particularly when used in conjunction with Helena Grice's *Negotiating Identities*, which complements Simal's book in its approach to the issues and strategies enacted in Asian American women's writing. At a critical moment such as this one, where Asian American studies has gained a firm place in University curriculums in the United States and in many places in Europe, a concern with the links between the cultural production of Asian immigrants in the United States and Britain, for example, is being stressed, as well as the connecting strands between this writing and that in other countries who have increasingly large populations of Asians. Developed as a critical introduction to Asian American and British Asian writing for students in the U.K., Grice's book offers a theoretically-grounded, comprehensive view of the development of the writing in question. Its scope is wider than Simal's, as Grice engages the several Asian ethnicities (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and South Asian), and foregrounds issues such as mother/daughter writing—which practically dominated Asian American women's writing in the 1970s and 1980s—the intersection of gender and identity, narratives on Red China, writing biraciality, the question of citizenship and national identity, as well as definitions of home.

Grice chooses to approach the texts in question from a feminist perspective which “stresses the importance of not creating critical authority at the expense of the writing under consideration”. This stance, which refreshingly contradicts current obsessions with theory, permits her to foreground issues of literary aesthetics and imagination. Her close readings of the narratives she considers, therefore, simultaneously privilege writing as both an act of agency and an art form. The formulation of the book, which begins with an overall introduction to the central themes and seminal works of the different Asian ethnicities, as well as the positioning of Asian diasporic women in history and in the context of feminist theory, is pedagogically useful. The development of ideas and discussion is clear

and concise, setting the groundwork for the rest of the study. In particular, the discussion of biraciality and the question of national and cultural affiliations are carefully nuanced and intelligent. Significantly, Grice engages texts that cover the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, allowing the reader to appreciate the changing perspectives on race: the Eaton sisters, Diana Chang, Han Suyin, and Aimee Liu's definitions of and negotiations with biraciality provide a comprehensive view of a critical aspect of Asian diasporic identity politics. In the chapter on citizenship and national identity, the author tackles a variety of texts that crucially problematize America's and Canada's treatment of its own citizens, and the Asian American/Canadian subjects' personal and creative responses to the trauma of relocation, which led to their psychological and political dislocation.

Another of Grice's concerns in her book is the need to critically engage texts which may be popular, but which are more critically complex than may appear—Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* or Adeline Mah's *Falling Leaves* have become notable bestsellers, and may have contributed to promoting dangerous stereotypes about Chinese culture. Grice shows how these texts are actually much more complex than they may appear to the general public, and respond significantly to cultural moments. Interestingly, Grice tackles a question that plagues scholars of ethnic American literatures who are not (ethnic) Americans and work outside the United States—the insidious issue of cultural accessibility and authority, and the oftentimes ironically ghettoizing disposition of American scholars when faced with European colleagues. She points to what Houston Baker has called “earned participation” of white scholars in a “still evolving work” of ethnic criticism. For those of us who are not ethnic Americans and yet teach and write on ethnic or diasporic literatures, the question of insider/outsider position continues to be a contested terrain. Nonetheless, this notable text proves that Grice has rightfully earned her place among her colleagues—Asian American or not—who engage this literature.

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From her position as an Indian German, Mita Banerjee uses her perception of the constituent of her transcultural position as a springboard for the interrogation of critical issues, as they are deployed in fiction and theory. Her recent *The Chutneyfication of History* focuses on three emblematic Asian diasporic writers: Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, and Bharati Mukherjee. Using the paradigms of both postcolonialism in its intersections with postmodernism, Banerjee constructs a critically challenging and remarkably coherent discussion of the manner in which these writers manipulate issues of history, spaces, language, authenticity, and representation. Where Rushdie employs chutney as a metaphor for his version of historiography, Banerjee enhances the metaphorical applicability of this image to negotiate the representations of cultural difference and interculturality. The author teases out fascinating implications of this central

metaphor: she points out how the chutney’s “disruptive spatiality” allows the migrant “to juxtapose a variety of disparate features among which no hierarchy is established” as it simultaneously gestures towards “the constant push and pull between heterogeneity on the one hand and a spatial unity on the other, an incessant to and fro which I believe is central to the discourses of postcoloniality in general”. The structure of Banerjee’s discussion is based on what she calls “postmodernism’s own preoccupations” —the question of spaces, originality, the concept of political agency, language, and nationhood— from the point of view of the acknowledged master narratives.

By reading these diasporic narratives firmly in the context of critical theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism, Banerjee critically challenges specific ideas regarding issues such as hybridity or reinscription. Her perceptive interrogation of her “concerns”, as well as her exceptionally clear and well-founded arguments lead to a text that challenges the reader to re-think previously authoritative issues —she does not unquestioningly accept the tenets or the practice of postmodern criticism, pointing out their pitfalls and suggesting manners of fruitfully deploying them. Her criticism, for example, of what she calls “postmodernism’s infatuation with marginality” allows her to explain how this concern may actually invalidate itself: “for postmodernism professes to love the Other precisely in his/her marginality, never sameness. In this light, postmodernism’s dubbing the struggle for inclusion a cognitive failure is all the more precarious, since emancipation, through inclusion, will inevitably result in the loss of marginality, depriving postmodernism of what it feeds on”. Her revising of some of the tenets of postmodernism are especially gratifying, as she elucidates, for instance, the crucial need for postmodernism to consider the spatial implications of some theories of postmodernity, lest it develop into another universalist narrative. Speaking of the “pocomo” blend, she stresses the need to consider that the fusion of postmodernism and postcolonialism occasions a deconstruction of history “*on another level*”, the latter point being crucial because a failure of appropriate reinscription “epitomizes the postmodern practice of a defiance of concepts not through a thrust towards inclusion but a deconstruction of the very concepts themselves”. Her detailed and perceptive readings of several texts by each of the writers in question illustrate her critical concerns on both a theoretical and narrative level. Her reading of the nature of hybridity, in particular, as well as her acknowledged ambivalence precisely because of its many possibilities, is useful as an approach to other texts. The questions she raises are intelligently deployed, and she outlines her process of arriving at answers (or more questions) with a logic and lucidity that is remarkable in such a young scholar. I have no hesitation in classifying this study as one of the boldest and most brilliant negotiations of the critical terms we often exploit unquestioningly in our studies of diasporic and postcolonial issues.

## Reviews

For the subjects of the Asian diaspora, as well as the critics who study them, questions of historical contingencies, cultural choices, the possibilities of self-invention and self-inscription mark the itineraries of transculturalism. These critical studies also gesture significantly towards a highly useful approach: the firm grounding in both critical theory and a close reading of texts —not allowing theory to create the texts, but rather to elucidate them. By struggling to contextualize the narratives in history (and historiography), diverse locations or the process of travel itself, specific cultural moments, these texts reiterate the idea of the palimpsestic/chameleonic character of the subjects of the Asian diaspora, as well as their capacity for change, adaptation, and creativity, as they are not only transformed by the cultures they live within, but in turn, transform society and artistic canons.