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Book Review

Holding Their Own: Perspectives on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States, by Dorothea Fischer-Homung and Heike Raphael-Hemandez (2000), 336 pages.

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Nothing more vividly reveals a culture to itself than a recognition of itself in an outsider's eyes. It is not too much to say then that one of the most productive features of a collection of essays on multi-ethnic literatures of America published in Europe, such as *Holding Their Own*, is that it provides an outsider's perspective. By the same token, it is worth noting too that the multicultural situation in the U.S. potentially has some light to shed on Europe's own struggles with multi-ethnic constituencies. Admittedly, it is not always clear in this collection that cultural distance is really the salient feature of the comments made by the contributors, or that there is something particularly European about a given commentator's analysis. Still, most of the contributors are affiliated with universities outside of the U.S., or are not U.S. residents, and this certainly plays a role in the rich variety of perspectives gathered together in this publication. Such "outsider" perspectives can productively displace a U.S.-centered understanding of U.S. multi-ethnic literatures' significance in a larger, international context.

What is invoked in this rich and varied collection of essays, then, is a kind of double consciousness: an appreciation of those literatures simultaneously within the national (U.S.) context and in a broader conceptual frame. This is most appropriate, since double consciousness is one of the five key themes organizing these wide-ranging essays--the other four are the various ways of conceptualizing the intertwined notions of home, place and space, cultural difference, the politics and poetics of opposition, and marginality. The editors admit candidly that the volume's twenty-four essays (not counting the introduction or the brief Afterword) "have been divided into chapters to unify a decidedly non-unified project" (xii-xiii). The essays appearing under each chapter do have a rough coherence; they can be regarded as variations on themes.

As Europe lurches into a new, "unified" era, new tensions are emerging everywhere. Can the U.S. experience, even if it is not exactly analogous, offer lessons for dealing with what will increasingly be a more unified and yet more multi-cultural or multi-ethnic European

polity? This is a premise of the essay by Nellie McKay that opens the first "chapter" of the book, entitled "That Double Consciousness and More." Her premise is that the case of African American literature is exemplary in any understanding of the multi-ethnic literature of the U.S., for this literature is founded on a model of "double consciousness" about the status of black people in America. In this essay, therefore, McKay offers a critical history of African Americans relocating themselves in Europe to "re-create" themselves, to become what they could not be in the racist atmosphere at "home." Among the figures she touches upon briefly are W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes. Also taking a cue from DuBois, Michel Fabre's essay on the New Orleans *gens libres de couleur*examines the neglected writings of mixed-blood descendants of African and French or Spanish Louisianans as a "talented tenth" *avant la lettre.* Fabre explores the question whether this elite group of writers can be said to have defined a determinate ethnic and collective identity at the edges of American society. If so, what are the features of that hybrid identity—what exactly is the nature of its doubleness?

Gabriele Pisarz-Ramirez studies the way in which Mexican American subjects straddle two cultures. She suggests that many Chicana/ o writers such as Alfredo Véa and Francisco Alarcón present a polyglossic identity construction within a mainstream U.S. cultural topography, and as such are destabilizing "internal others." Ineke Bockting adopts a more theoretical approach to the meaning of double consciousness in her essay on Chicana/ o literature. Like Fabre, Bockting studies examples of "border" texts. She attempts to bring (particularly) psychoanalytic models of the stranger or the other to bear in her analysis of "twoness." Although she tends to collapse the different approaches of Freud, Kristeva and Lacan in her analysis (not to mention Bakhtin), the psychoanalytic emphasis is useful in emphasizing the way in which the incorporation of the gaze of the (culturally dominant) other creates a splitting *within* the self, and helps one to see that early on, DuBois was thinking of a pre-conscious (unconscious) process, but later on developed a notion of a split in social identity. It is double consciousness of a different kind that animates Tobe Levin's critique of Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café.* Levin, who describes himself as a Jew committed to combating female genital mutilation, expresses nevertheless a deep discomfort with Naylor's alleged misrepresentation of the implication of Jews in the painful practice. Here the double consciousness is a matter of trying to keep in view simultaneously the discourse of human rights and the critique of racism, which Levin suggests Naylor fails to do.

In this first chapter, which presents essays that in a sense frame the collection as a whole, "double consciousness" is treated not solely in terms of the DuBoisian model but in terms of a range of double perspectives that highlight the tensions between "insider" and "outsider" positions, or some variants of the latter (such as the "outsider within"). While it is important to recognize the theoretical or conceptual danger that a schematization relying on an opposition between insiders and outsiders may ironically reinscribe vitiated racialist binaries, it is worth remembering that the category of double consciousness continues to have real-world relevance because of the persistence of just such racialist binaries even in these so-called new times of global culture.

The second chapter of the book is organized around the clustered themes of home, place, and space. Elaine Kim's essay, "Myth, Memory, and Desire: Contemporary Korean

American Writing and Visual Art," turns, as do so many of her other writings, on a personal connection to the issues she discusses. She considers the first novel by Heinz Insu Fenkl in which the mixed-race author indicts U.S. imperialist intervention in Korea *and* racism against Koreans "at home." Kim juxtaposes this discussion with a collaborative performance and installation called *Angulas: Street of Gold* and the installation *Turtle Boat Head* as hybrid (in the strong, postcolonial sense rather than the colloquial sense in which it often appears) narratives that throw into sharp relief the long and often underappreciated history of "U.S. military, political, economic, and cultural presence in Korean lives" (83). The importance of insisting on such hybrid (in the strong sense) perspectives cannot be overstated, because they challenge the lazy or cozy representations of Asian groups in the U.S.—as Kim suggests when she briefly considers a short novel by Patti Kim.

It is not as though only non-white groups are represented in this wide-ranging collection. Following Kim's essay, the reader encounters not only a consideration (by Yeşim Başarır) of Norwegian American immigrant writing but also an essay (by Alison Goeller) on Italian American immigrant writing. These two contributions are fine analyses of the pain even some putatively "white" immigrants suffered before they became assimilated. Nevertheless, a reader might well wonder whether there is not something to be said for making a more rigorous distinction along the divide of white/ non-white ethnicities in U.S. history. Can one really juxtapose, and therefore risk seeming to gloss over the specific material differences in, the trajectories of Asian American and European American struggles with assimilation?

Consider, for the sake of making such rigorous distinctions, two equally discriminating essays in this "chapter." The first is Lene Johannesen's sophisticated analysis of the diacritical pair space/ place in Helena Viramontes' story of Mexican migrant workers. The second is Antje Kley's sensitive recuperation of the antiessentialist and the incommensurable in Audre Lorde's constructions of home and identity in her "autobiographical" work, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In the work of Viramontes and Lorde, the presence of race has a completely different charge from the way race might function in O.E. RØlvaag's work (which Başarir discusses) and Tina De Rosa's work (which Goeller explores). This difference ought to receive some sustained analysis in a collection on multi-ethnic literatures. This is not to say that the handicap of race suffered by a Mexican migrant such as Estrella, in Viramontes' book, is the same as the handicap of race endured by a highly educated Black lesbian intellectual such as Audre Lorde. Even oppressed ethnic groups should not be homogenized as if their internal differences were immaterial in the face of their shared oppression. Indeed my point is that the attempt to impose some coherence on essays gathered together should not countenance the risk of assimilating all such differences of class and race or national origin. Such collections would benefit, rather than suffer, from registering the differences. The vicissitudes of "home," place, and space that are at the core of the essays in this chapter can be best appreciated in a *differential* context.

The third chapter, entitled "The (Un)Translatability of Culture" begins with an essay by Mita Banerjee on Bharati Mukherjee's controversial novel, *Jasmine.* Building on Homi Bhabha's figure of the hybrid and undecidable chapati circulating as a token of sly resistance in the colonial context of India, Banerjee, like Kley in the previous chapter, argues to retain a

certain incommensurability, over and against the appropriation of cultural difference in "intercultural contact." It is interesting to contrast this essay with Cathy Waegner's essay, "Toni Morrison and the 'Other-Reader: Oprah Winfrey and Marcel Reich-Ranicki as Mediators?" In her essay Waegner inquires into the interpretive authority of a (white) "other" reader, given that Morrison is so vehement in her assertion that she writes exclusively for a black audience. She frames her exploration of some thorny questions effectively by counterposing the reception of Morrison's work by a television "literary quartet" in Germany and by Oprah Winfrey in the U.S.: are the white German readers, represented by the irreverent Ranicki necessarily disqualified by virtue of their whiteness? Could someone of Morrison's intellectual caliber really be acceding to an unreflected essentialism?

As Dorothea Fischer-Hornung shows in her essay in this chapter, being black is neither sufficient nor necessary qualification for an author who wishes to "represent" black experience. Fischer-Hornung delicately and painstakingly contrasts the "ethnographic" work of Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham. On the face of it, both are black women who enter as ethnographers; but as it turns out, Hurston's response is to offer a right-wing apologetics, whereas Dunham, whom Hurston clearly saw as an inferior rival, comes across as rather more sympathetic. Fischer-Hornung is cautious—perhaps overcautious—in giving Hurston the benefit of doubt wherever possible, as she speculates on the possible reasons for Hurston's problematic justification of U.S. military intervention in Haiti. Hurston as right-leaning apologist, even if we remind ourselves again of her reputation for political conservatism, today still seems to have little in common with the author of the justly famous classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Race and ethnicity are also the key categories for the essays by Dominique Marais and Monika Müller. Marais illuminates the political context within which Melville composed *The Confidence Man*, by pointing up the markers of ethnicity that might be missed by readers who are disposed to read it as innocent of racialism. Müller, by tracing the representation of anxieties about racial mixing and particularly interracial sexuality in the works of Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, likewise reminds us about the hyperconsciousness of race in nineteenth century in America. Of course many recent cultural studies scholars have developed the racialist subtext of nineteenth-century American literature. But Marais and Müller are examples of an European perspective which, having a critical distance from the U.S., might hold up the mirror to the establishmentarian reading of American literature of the period. This chapter offers perhaps the most coherent grouping of essays.

If it is an important task for an observer of multi-ethnic literature of the U.S. to continually revisit and possibly re-form the establishment narratives of race and ethnicity, then it would seem that a review of the established canon would seem to be a first requirement. The collection's fourth chapter, entitled "Oppositional Poetics," begins with a pair of essays by Haryette Mullen and Barry Maxwell that seek to enlarge the canon to include writers who would probably be considered marginal in the academy. Mullen presents Erica Hunt and Will Alexander as challengers of aesthetic convention, and Maxwell suggests that Nathaniel Mackey's genre-bending *Bedouin Hornbook,* with its fusion of jazz and philosophic reflection, myth and literary conceit, represents the heartache as well as the

yearning for redemption of oppressed minorities. Kirsten Twelbeck reads Teresa Hak Kyung Cha's equally unconventional (but increasingly canonical, it might be said) *DICTEE* as an example of "code-switching" reflection on a variety of issues, ranging from U.S. imperialism and exceptionalism to identity-construction and gender. But she also develops Gabriele Schwab's reflections on postmodernist writing and reader reception theory to gloss Cha's representation of "otherness," and in this context she reconsiders the questions of political representation and the ownership of culture.

Similar issues of representation (in Gayatri Spivak's sense, *Vertretung*, proxy) are taken up by Frances Smith Foster in the context of slave narratives, and she too contextualizes her discussion by reference to the academic establishment. Her essay appears in the fifth and final Chapter, entitled "The Margin Sustains the Center?" Marginality, considered from various angles, is the key theme in this last chapter. In Daniel Walden's essay, some very established Jewish American writers are refigured as marginal. Bellow, Malamud and Ozick, Walden suggests, write not only as ethnic minority writers but as writers who cast their minority Jewish moral vision in terms of an increasingly unfashionable Existentialism and essentialism. Yet, because they do articulate their Existentialism and essentialism with a longstanding Jewish religious and ethical tradition, they manage to render those categories vital even for a contemporary reader who might expect to be reminded continually about how in a postmodern age we are beyond good and evil because there is no transcendental Truth to which we might cleave without embarrassment. Recent Jewish American writers, as Susanne Klingenstein suggests in her own contribution immediately following Walden's, are also "eccentric" supports--marginal sources of inspiration for more mainstream fiction.

The idea of the constitutive importance of the marginal, the fragment, the exceptional, is an important development in poststructuralist cultural critique and especially in postcolonial studies. Because she presents such a variety of examples, Klingenstein regrettably allows herself little space to examine these works in any depth, but her essay usefully suggests the wealth of Jewish writers and cultural producers, from Ozick to Philip Roth to Jerry Seinfeld, along with many less familiar names in between. She also suggests that it is precisely because Jews are today relatively well assimilated into the mainstream that Jewish tradition can once again become a source of fresh creativity, not to mention new Jewish identities, beyond the old traumatic stereotypes that have historically been deployed by others against them but also beyond what the Jews themselves might have imagined.

The imperative of seeking fresh ethnic identity constructs also motivates other ethnic genre writing, and it is not just a contemporary phenomenon, as Marina Cacioppo suggests in her study of Italian American crime fiction from the first decades of the last century. Neither can it be said that the ceaseless production of ever new constructs of identity represents only the felt needs of marginal individuals themselves. Indeed, as Carolyn Burmedi shows in the final essay in the collection, sometimes identity constructs have to be revised and imposed on minorities in order to keep them in their place. Even in popular cultural products, simplified, crudely collectivized ethnic identities (somewhere between stereotype and fantasy) seem to appear as if burned into the national imaginary. This imposition of identity constructs is evident in a series such as *Star Trek.* Witness the semi-Vulcan, "subhuman" otherness of Spock, the crypto-Soviet expansionist tendencies of the Klingons like Worf (the name seems

to hint with knowing wink to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), the cyborg Borgs, and the only too obvious alienage of the "Ferrengi"—the very name means "foreigner." Burmedi nicely captures some of the superficial political correctness of official or Hollywood-establishment "multiculturalism" that undergirds such shows as *Star Trek.* More importantly she suggests that even those fans who object to the show's political correctness may miss the important point that even political correctness cannot evade the responsibility to take seriously the racism that conditions the multi-ethnic space of the United States of America.

By way of conclusion one can say that this collection as a whole offers a broad view of the multi-ethnic culture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America; but it also usefully points both domestic (U.S.) and international audiences toward the future of the study of multi-ethnic literatures of the U.S. One can sympathize with the editors' ambition to include a wide variety of papers presented at the June 1998 Heidelberg MELUS Europe Conference, and it is hard to give shape and depth to such a proliferation of approaches. One could ask for greater theoretical or conceptual regularity and rigor, but that could be asking too much from such a collection. Still, considered as a gathering of conference proceedings, this collection offers a wide window on the literary representation of ethnicity in the U.S. and also indirectly offers a stimulus for rethinking the meaning of true multiple-culturalism for a more global stage and a more globalized age.