

Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, eds. 2005: *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*. Seattle and London: U Washington P. 296 pp.<sup>1</sup>

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The articles included in the anthology *Form and Transformation* are of great interest given the fact that, overall, they provide a different approach from that offered by some of the first studies of Asian American literature. As one of the editors, Zhou Xiaojing, explains in the introduction, the tendency was to over-emphasize the common themes in works by Asian American writers together with the social and historical contexts of their literary productions.

Such was the perspective adopted by Elaine H. Kim in her influential work *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982). Notwithstanding its valuable contribution to the field, critical writings following this kind of analysis seem to use literature as a means of producing a socio-historical study of Asians and Asian Americans in the United States rather than a critique of literature itself. Despite Kim's feminist perspective, which clearly differentiates her from that of the influential *Aiiieeeee!* anthology (Chin *et al.* 1974), both works share a trait common to most criticism on Asian American literature up to the late 1980s. As the editors of *Form and Transformation* point out, this consisted in assessing the worth of a text according to the extent to which it resisted notions of assimilation within a dominant culture. This had the effect of ignoring "the ways in which Asian American authors have resisted, subverted, and reshaped hegemonic European American genres", an approach which underlines the "complex relationship between Asian American and traditional European American literature" (4).

In fact, this anthology follows the trends shown by those critical works, especially since the 1990s, which problematize analyses based on the assimilation/resistance binary, such as David Palumbo Liu's *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999), David L. Eng's *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinities in Asian America* (2001) and Viet Than Nguyen's *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002), among others. Recent critical works state that, as part of American literature, Asian American texts should be considered not in opposition to, but as sites of negotiation with/within mainstream culture. Theoretical approaches should, therefore, bear in mind issues concerning diaspora, for example, with its emphasis on transnationality and hybridity, which question clear-cut binaries in relation to the construction of identity. Other aspects are the intersectionality of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual and class discourses in such constructions. These proposals, simultaneously, de-essentialize the racial (and gendered) Asian American subject—deconstructing an ethnographic analysis—as well as that of the universal, Western/American subject as white, male, middle-class and heterosexual. This tendency has been further emphasized by gay and lesbian studies and the publication of clearly

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queer texts, for instance, Filipino American Zamora Linmark's short novel *Rolling the Rs* (1995) and Chinese American Chay Yew's play *Porcelain* (1997).

These critical approaches have, in turn, led to a reevaluation of the question of generic form in Asian American literature. In particular, they have taken into account postmodern poetics, its use of intertextuality and the concept that the transformation and subversion of these forms are a kind of "politicized aesthetics" (25) as a means of addressing, challenging and changing American culture. This is precisely the aim of *Form and Transformation*: to reveal how Asian American writers have appropriated genres traditionally associated with Western literature, not so much to express their degree of assimilation—and consequently of acceptance by mainstream American society—but their attempts to question and transform them.

The anthology covers a wide range of texts from the late nineteenth century by Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna, to those by late twentieth century authors such as Timothy Liu, Lois-Ann Yamanaka and Chang-rae Lee. It also analyzes a variety of genres including memoirs and autobiographies, poetry, the short story cycle and the novel, but it excludes plays—a genre which is gaining importance within Asian American letters. It should also be noted that the anthology analyses works by Asian Americans of diverse origins, not merely Chinese Americans, the ethnic group with whom the term *Asian American* is usually identified. Texts by Americans of Japanese, Korean, Cambodian, Hawaiian and Indian background have also been included. This fact highlights the coalitional nature of the term and, consequently, its heterogeneity as a result in recent times of the changing demographic composition of Asian immigration in the United States.

The anthology can be divided into four sections. The first includes contributions dealing with authors considered to be the pioneers of Asian American writing: Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna, Edith Maude Eaton/Sui Sin Far and Yung Wing. In fact, Floyd Cheung's article on Yung's work *My Life in China and America* (1909) is also a link to the second section, which concentrates upon those authors known for their use of the autobiography and memoir, such as Jade Snow Wong.

The third section consists of articles on contemporary Asian American poets. Xiaojing analyses the poetry of John Yau and Kimiko Hahn, while Richard Serrano looks particularly at the interaction between Timothy Liu and Walt Whitman. Finally, the articles from the fourth section concentrate upon fiction. These evaluate the works of Nora Okja Keller, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Chang-rae Lee and Bharati Mukherjee. The first two, by Samina Najmi, co-editor of the anthology, and Rocío G. Davis, analyze how the authors transform and re-appropriate the *bildungsroman* in order to incorporate in the American imagery the experiences of Korean Americans and Hawaiian Japanese Americans respectively. On the other hand, Tina Y. Chen looks at Chang-rae Lee's deconstruction of the spy novel in *Native Speaker* (1995) as a means of reflecting the author's perspectives of racial invisibility and its consequences on the formation of the Self. Finally, Pallavi Rastogi's article on Mukherjee's novel *The Holder of the World* (1993) considers how the author, drawing from such a canonical text as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, deconstructs the homogenic image of mainstream America.

*Form and Transformation* opens with two contributions by Dominka Ferens and David Shih, who question traditional views on the Eaton sisters. Winnifred and Edith

Maude Eaton were Eurasians, daughters of an English father and a Chinese mother. Unlike her sister, who in her texts acknowledged her origins, Winnifred projected her public self as half Japanese, changing her name to that of Onoto Watanna. This decision, as Ferens argues, had in mind the more positive image of Japan versus China at the turn of the nineteenth century and, consequently, responded to the West's interest in the country, then regarded as both a source of exoticism and as a means of gaining insight into the 'Japanese miracle'. A first reading of Watanna, then, following the criteria of assimilation versus resistance, would consider her an assimilationist writer, satisfying the readership's expectancy for the exotic and for explanations of Japan's rapid modernization. Ferens argues that, in Watanna's attempts to indulge Western fantasies of the Orient, she not only appropriated but transformed texts on Japan authored by Anglo-American men. The subversion of her literary production, then, consists of deconstructing nineteenth century ethnographic theories by which race, being intimately related to culture, was essentialized. Her supposedly Japanese background legitimized her as an authentic, authoritative voice on anything Japanese. The article, thus, manages to reveal a not easily recognizable, subversive aspect of Watanna.

Shih, on the other hand, reads Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far's best-known piece of writing, 'Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian' (1909) in relation to another text that was originally published along with the essay: her own self-portrait. This kind of intertextuality, therefore, subverts more overtly than Watanna's writings nineteenth century ethnographic theories. Her portrait challenges any clear racial identity and, according to Shih's reading of both texts, reflects Sui Sin Far's awareness of the racialized body as a socio-cultural construction. Not only the written, but also the visual text, deconstruct stereotypical images of Chinese, problematizing racial discourses and strict categorizations.

One of the most interesting articles in the book is Cheung's re-interpretation of *My Life in China and America* by the Chinese diplomat Yung Wing. The analysis of the text undermines the cultural-nationalist reading provided by the *Aiiieeeee!* editors led by Frank Chin. Cheung convincingly inserts Yung's autobiography within the American literary tradition by demonstrating his particular use of this characteristically American genre, relating him to Benjamin Franklin. Aware of the correlation between the individual and his/her country, Yung wrote about himself as a hard-working, self-made man, following the precepts of manhood and virtue as exposed by Theodore Roosevelt. From the perspective of masculine studies, the use of the genre and especially of Standard 'correct' English represents a strategic "resistant appropriation" (79). Yung was not only reasserting himself, but also his fellow countrymen and ultimately China.

On the other hand, Christopher Douglas's analysis of Jade Snow Wong's autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), does not initially seem so convincing about the writer's use of the genre as a means of intervening in dominant American discourse. This is partly due to the first part of the article which describes how Wong's autobiography was used by the U.S. State Department to convey an image of the United States as "an international beacon of democracy, liberty, and importantly, racial harmony" (103). The fact that Wong describes life in Chinatown from a culturalist viewpoint, has led some critics to consider her work as an attempt to make Chinese Americans more acceptable by rendering them, yet again, as exotic and, above all,

unchallenging. Douglas considers, however, that Wong's use of the ethnic rather than the racial discourse, predominant within the social sciences in the 1950s, challenges essentialist attitudes around race and culture for its emphasis on the performative nature of behavior and customs. The article, in fact, exemplifies the limitations imposed on Asian American texts when they are interpreted ethnographically so that Wong's usage of the autobiography is not particularly emphasized as a means of intervening within the dominant culture.

This is not the case of the following two contributions, which close the section on the the memoir/autobiography. Both Rajini Srikanth's article on Abraham Verghese's memoir *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS* (1994), and Teri Shaffer Yamada's text on autobiographies by Cambodian Americans, emphasize the interaction between the individual and the community, (in the case of the latter, the global community), a trait common to most literature produced by minorities. This characteristic in itself transforms the traditional concept of the genre, described by Srikanth as one which "charts a journey—typically from youth to old age, from ignorance to knowledge, or from naïveté to maturity" (126), highlighting individual growth. In the case of Verghese's memoir, as underlined by Srikanth, there are actually two journeys which intertwine with each other. One is the AIDS patients' return to family and home, and the other is Verghese's own integration into the community as the doctor who enables the re-establishment of links between his patients, their families and the outer world. His status as an outsider as a result of his race and ethnicity connects him to that of his patients ostracized by illness, and provides the image, like that of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, of the various pieces which sewn together form a unity and a "meaningful and useful relationship" (130).

The Cambodian American autobiographies published in the 1980s use the genre not so much to think about American identity but as a means of interrogating how American values about democracy, justice and human rights are un/applied within the United States and in more global contexts. The autobiography is used as a means of transforming the author/protagonist from a victim to a fighter demanding justice both on a national and an international level. From this perspective these autobiographies occupy a space between borders, emphasizing the transnational experiences, and consequently, their interconnections in the globalized world of the late twentieth century.

Zhou Xiaojing's and Richard Serrano's contributions focus on the ongoing dialogue between Asian American and Euro-American poetry. The result is the re-definition of the genre to include within the literary tradition, once again, the experience of Americans of Asian origin. Xiaojing analyses how the poetry of John Yau and Kimiko Hahn appropriates and redefines a particular lyrical form strongly associated with American letters: confessional poetry. Xiaojing demonstrates how both poets, through their manipulation of this kind of lyric, criticize the links traditionally made between Asian American and Asian literary forms. Yau and Hahn emphasize the fact that their work forms part of American letters by their alliance with American poetic movements such as Language Poetry. At the same time they transform American poetics, in particular confessional poetry, by subverting the privileged position of the 'I' which ignores other identities marginalized by gender and racial discourses. This is achieved, for example, by the use of a plurality of voices in their work.

Affirming one's belonging to American literature, as well as criticizing it, is part of Timothy Liu's agenda as revealed by Serrano's article. This is reflected in the fact that Liu addresses himself to the icon of gay American poetry, Walt Whitman, a strategy which he shares with the African American gay poet Essex Hemphill. Serrano argues that Hemphill and Liu, in turn, talk to each other through Whitman, manipulating their common literary legacy so as to highlight their exclusion from the mainstream as well as their different experiences as ethnic, gay men.

The latter part of the volume consists of articles that examine the intervention of particular authors in modifying variants of the narrative genre. Samina Najmi and Rocío G. Davis look at the transformation of the *bildungsroman* in *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller and in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, both from 1997. As Davis asserts, a conventional *bildungsroman* "functions as a program for identification with the accepted social order and value system as it chronicles the protagonist's assimilation of his or her society's values" (233). Moreover, as Najmi states, it is a kind of narrative traditionally concerned with unmarked universal identities, that is, with Eurocentrism and the masculine. Najmi successfully argues that Keller's novel actually combines two forms, the *bildungsroman* and the war narrative, and in the process feminizes and asianizes them. On the other hand, Davis demonstrates how Yamanaka too, manipulates not only the *bildungsroman* but also the short story cycle, following the line of other ethnic writers such as Amy Tan. What both Keller and Yamanaka do with their texts is modify the *bildungsroman* so as to draw attention to the specific experiences of ethnic women within a particular historical, socio-cultural background. What is important about Davis's choice of Yamanaka's text is that it foregrounds the contribution made by Hawaiian writers to Asian American literature, showing more bluntly the complexities of identity formation in a multicultural context.

Tina Y. Chen analyses Chang-rae Lee's appropriation of the spy novel in *Native Speaker* (1995). The article shows how Lee subverts the genre by portraying a character who does not embody the traits of the typical spy hero. This, in turn, is used to question the roles that we are assigned or even choose to play out in accordance with certain parameters, be it race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. In her analysis Chen demonstrates how Lee forces the main character, Henry Park, and consequently the reader, to look at the performative nature of identity by having a spy playing varying roles according to the requirements of his job. Being someone who works undercover, the spy is an excellent vehicle for social criticism, in this case enhanced by the protagonist's Korean origin. An interesting aspect of Chen's article is her argument of how Lee counterattacks stereotypes of the Asian spy (such as Fu Manchu) in popular texts by Euro-American writers.

Finally, the anthology closes with an article by Pallavi Rastogi on Bharati Mukherjee's 1993 novel *The Holder of the World*. It is interesting to note that the volume opens with an article on Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna, an author traditionally viewed as an advocating assimilationist, and closes with another on Mukherjee, criticized for the same reason, and how both essays challenge that vision. Following the same line as the previous articles, Rastogi proposes to read Mukherjee's novel as a claim being part of the American canon as well as the right to intervene in it so as to deconstruct the conventional image of a homogenized American culture. This

is achieved by using *The Scarlet Letter* as a starting point for her novel. Hawthorne's heroine, Hester Prynne, becomes Hannah Easton, a woman who, in seventeenth century India has a love affair with an Indian monarch and eventually returns to Salem, already pregnant. Mukherjee thus legitimates the presence of Indians in the United States as much as that of Europeans, suggesting that hybridity has always been an intrinsic characteristic of the country. By rewriting the canon she attempts "to make the 'mainstream' an amalgam of 'minorstreams'" (282).

Overall, the collected essays in *Form and Transformation* achieve their aim of demonstrating the necessity of taking into account the political agenda behind the choice of a particular genre and, especially, of its subversion, something which may not be so apparent at first sight. This kind of analysis provides a complex literary critique, rather than simple ethnographic readings and the assimilation/resistance binary, emphasizing how Asian and Anglo America interact and construct each other.

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