

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism: Critical Imaginaries for a Global Age*, edited by Aparajita Nanda (Routledge, 2015)**

Transnationalism, a topic important in redefining and understanding geopolitical space and human identity, has recently gained international awareness and recognition as an urgent human condition and issue. This collection of essays focuses the transnational perspective on US Ethnic Studies, especially those communities which have been 'historically aggrieved' (xiii). The editor, Aparajita Nanda, attempts to reconceptualize Ethnic Studies and bring it into a global framework, examining its influence on Transnational Studies, while looking toward a broader discussion across disciplines and nations without 'obscuring the particularism of the many different kinds of ethnic affiliations covered by Ethnic Studies' (1). To this end, *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism* contains multiple perspectives and maintains two levels of analysis through the collection, appealing to both the popular reader as well as the academic.

Nanda, a scholar in both Postcolonial Studies and African American Studies, has assembled essays which examine not only the networks that link the US to the rest of the world but also qualities of literature which minimize borders. According to Nanda, these essays look toward a 'symbiotic relationship' between ethnic and transnational literatures (6). In focusing on the spread and influence of subcultures, Nanda argues, Western hegemony will be reconciled with what she calls 'fragmentation', the rise and scattering of 'transnational subcultures' (6). Although the series claims to focus on 'literature', the editor has taken the cultural studies approach and views all products which document culture as literature. Thus, the essays range from analysis of speculative fiction and art objects to personal reflections and theoretical discourse.

The book is divided into four clearly-introduced sections, giving a background note to the title and a general overview of what each essay will cover. Section 1, 'Identity Politics', includes a thought-provoking essay by Wlad Godrich, 'Beyond Identity: Bearings', which addresses a range of topics from think tanks to dictionaries to an Italian filmmaker. While discussing these topics, Godrich focuses on the theme of a productive notion of identity based on Heidegger's exploration of orientation, via Charles Taylor as recognition, arguing it is a key concept in the shifting space of identity. Both Keith P. Feldman and Esra Mizre Santesso deal with authors who are within the intersection of a transnational space and the Muslim diaspora. Feldman examines, through a perspective heavily influenced by Postcolonial theorist Edward Said, the racial struggle of Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad, her participation in the Hurricane Katrina aid group movement 'refugees for refugees', and the sense of identity she conveys in her poetry, especially the collection *breaking point*. Similarly, Santesso argues that Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* addresses problems of identity for Muslims in post-empire Britain. Nanda gives a brief recap of *Lilith's Brood* before analyzing the protagonist and another main character in Octavia Butler's trilogy to demonstrate how these characters have qualities that redefine hybridity and embrace what she calls a 'postnational complexity' (65). The last essay in Part 1, by Seulghee Lee, begins with Amiri Baraka's black transnationalism to which Lee contends Baraka's contribution to black discourses on love is a positive, if radical, source for black identity.

Part 2, 'Legacy/Trauma/ Healing,' opens with a brief introduction by the editor and then moves into how the past affects understandings of identity. In Pal Ahluwalia's essay of personal reflections of on the genocide in Rwanda, he reflects how tragedies can moves us forward toward healing. Even more than that, he envisions a new discipline devoted to reconciliation studies. Steven

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Lee's essay argues that Karen Tei Yamashita's use of non-linear time in her novel *I Hotel* both defies the submissive attitudes ethnic minorities have been expected to maintain in the US and underscores the politically dangerous communist sympathies of some of those minorities. Cameron Bushnell and George Hoagland examine the historical (in)visibilities of Blackness and its impact on how we view our knowledge of its relationship to the past, especially in ways that transcend or cross US borders. Bushnell hypothesizes that Rita Dove, in writing *Sonata Mulattica*, as both a poetry-influenced historical investigation and a contemporary celebration of George Bridgetower, has created a new genre which will gain meaning and significance by its subjectivities over time. Hoagland, after explaining the myth of Blackness, argues that Paul Beatty's satirical novel *Slumberland* actually works to highlight the shortcomings of the myth and its inaccurate place in African American literary history. In another essay dealing with the past and time, Cassel Busse begins by briefly explicating how Derrida and Benjamin treat the idea of ghosts as relational between the past and the present; she then questions whether that understanding informs or contradicts the presence of animal spirits in Thomas King's novel *Truth and Bright Water*.

Part 3 of the collection, 'Literary Crossings,' begins with questions posed by postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft about the possibilities of the lack of borders in the world. Ashcroft himself responds with a literary, historical, and philosophical discussion of why it is so difficult for us to imagine or actualize a world without borders, focusing on Giorgio Agamben's concepts of *homo sacer* and 'state of exception'. Ashcroft argues that the space that literature inhabits is the space in which we can imagine possibilities, hope, and transformation. Debora Stefani and Pamela McCallum examine novels written by transnational authors who explore a myriad of intersectionalities in their works but who also create hope in their dealing with the difficulties of those intersectionalities. Stefani argues the protagonist in Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt* creates his own transnational space in 1920s Paris through his ethnic and sexual identities and the special relationships those allow him to have within the story. McCallum recounts the dialogue Biyi Bendele's *The Street* has with the novels of Virginia Woolf, while the novel simultaneously relates the experiences of a diasporic population living in London. The Paris-educated Tunisian filmmaker Nacer Khemir's film, *The Dove's Lost Necklace*, according to Cynthia Mahamdi, explores and creates a new vision, not just of the historical Al-Andalus but also of the possible future and transnational experience which offers a different concept of globalization. In the final essay of Part 3, Juan Velasco uses a personal anecdote to introduce the reader to the topic of borders, but quickly brings the topic into focus by examining it in the context of the bilingual autobiographical trilogy of Francisco Jiménez, showing the 'potentiality' of the experiences of a young boy and the transnational space against tremendous obstacles and violence.

In the final section, 'Established and Emerging Canons: Revisions and Re-Visions', Hertha D. Sweet Wong argues that the location-specific art installations of Heap of Birds are part of a continuous struggle to deconstruct Western hegemonic notions of identity, time and place. Wendy Robbins, with Clarissa Hurley and Robin Sutherland, investigate the 'double understanding' of non-white feminists as expressed in their 'life-writing' from the perspective of women of academe in Canada and how those experiences have helped to shape that academic world of today. Meta L. Schettler examines the both significant and radical relationship of the haiku form in African American poetry through a close reading of several Black poets and a clear summary of the Haiku form and history both in Japan and elsewhere. While contending that US literature should include non-Anglophone language contributions, Su-ching Huang, in the final essay of the collection,

describes both Liu Daren and the themes that predominate his writing: melancholy and the hysteria of Chinese male immigrants.

An Afterword by John C. Hawly brings the book to a graceful close. Hawly reiterates some of the important themes and counters the arguments of those who may not see the value in such studies. The essays, although not all dealing with US literature as the series would suggest, were engaging and encouraged the readings of the companion essays. As for the inclusion of essays dealing with topics outside of US Literature, Nanda says in her introduction to the collection, 'This volume seeks to overcome the inherent U.S.-centric aspects of much scholarship in Ethnic Studies' (1). By broadening the anthology to include literatures beyond the borders of the US, Nanda really is actualizing her goal of a broader discussion across many disciplines and borders.

**Catherine Hauer**