

BOOK REVIEW

CRISTINA CHEVERESAN, *The Present with a Past: Explorations of Identity in Ethnic American Fiction*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2015, 367 p.

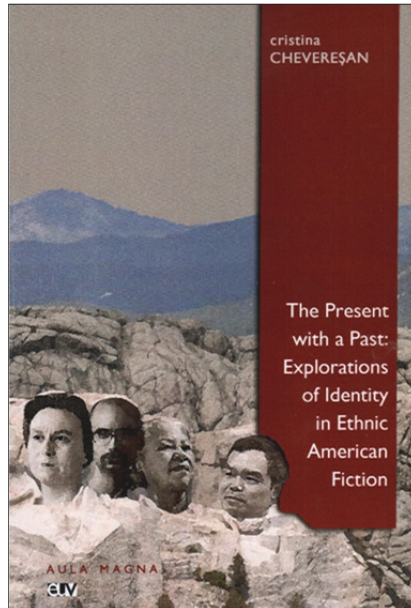
Cristina Cheveresan's book *The Present with a Past: Explorations of Identity in Ethnic American Fiction* represents a significant contribution to the larger American Studies landscape as well as to the more specialized Ethnic Studies field. For a multicultural society such as the American one, ethnic fiction represents the best barometer for the level of integration and well-being of a community and the most appropriate lens to use when analyzing its diversity and potential for accommodating those who are "different."

The author offers an in-depth overview of contemporary ethnic American fiction along theoretical and particular lines. The introduction of the book provides, selectively, concepts and terms which are later used as keys to understanding particular works and authors. The three constitutive parts which follow treat individual and communal hyphenated identities within the African-American, Asian-American and Latino-American ethnic groups. Just as the meaning of the term "ethnic" contains connotations of the national, as well as the "other", the terminology of writing about immigration by immigrants has changed its face overtime from "immigration novel" to "ethnic literature", to "multicultural representation", which reflects the mutable perceptions of this multi-faceted phenomenon.

The first part of the study is dedicated to the African-American experience and includes the following authors and works: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. The author explores various aspects of slavery and its impactful aftermath, identity crises and dilemmas raised by skin color, racial prejudice and white supremacy. She uses these texts to look into the individual and communal memory of trauma, and the ways in which these narratives of suffering and injustice raise historical aware-

ness. As some of these novelists suggest, through the voices of their protagonists, freedom has not brought about either relief from pain, or happiness because of the tragic past which keeps haunting individuals and communities alike. Infanticide, rape, physical and psychological abuse are fictionally invoked and used as "pretexts" for exposing the terrible distortion of values which the protagonists experienced in the wake of trauma.

The therapeutic potential of storytelling is invested in some of the characters who carry a message of hope beyond past and present discrimination. Storytelling as a strategy for survival and a means of coping with the ghosts of the past



is employed as the narrative driving force behind the fabric of most of these novels. Thus, the commodified, objectified, abused self stands the chance of redemption through keeping memories alive, as palliative, and as a way of preventing future bias and tragedy. Women especially bear the brunt of violence within and outside the black community, yet manage to find solace in divine grace and sisterhood.

Part II of *The Present with a Past* focuses on Asian-American-ness as embodied in the Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and Indian communities. Cristina Cheveresan selects the most representative works of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior*, respectively, to talk about fictional reflections of the Chinese-American ethnic group along the lines of adaptation to the big metropolis, language acquisition and self-reevaluation through the new language, the constant emotional hesitation between allegiance to the adoptive country and the old native land and the coming to terms with an identity in the making. Americanization as a professed goal against the multicultural background of New York City is another notable aspect of ethnicity which this study addresses with regards to its treatment in Gish Jen's *Typical American* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. The Japanese experience in the United States reflected in *No-No Boy* by John Okada presents the author with the opportunity to add another critical and analytical dimension to her study: the second generation Japanese-Americans' youth having to choose between their ethnic allegiances following Executive Order 9066 and the US Army's decision to recruit volunteers to fight against Imperial Japan. A similar pressure of life within the 'either/or' logic structures, thematically, is the collection of essays *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres* by Vietnamese-American author Andrew Lam. Being torn between the values inherent in the American way of life and those celebrated by Vietnamese culture and the solution of embracing diversity in a personalized manner

adds nuance and perspective to Cristina Cheveresan's enterprise of mapping ethnic American fiction. Last but not least, the understanding of identity as a construct, continuously in the making, re-making and un-making, constantly nostalgic, yet willing to adapt and belong, especially on the part of male Indian-Americans, is Jhumpa Lahiri's contribution to the rich dialogues about hyphenated selves in the United States.

The third part of this conversation documents the Latino-American community through the experience of writers such as Julia Alvarez, Juno Diaz, Gloria Anzaldua, Sandra Cisneros and Cristina Garcia. Julia Alvarez's fictional account of the Dominican-American journey is facilitated by the tradition of storytelling inherited from the old country, Diaz's perspective tackles male dominance and men's complex of inferiority within the immigrants' family and the large, American society. Identity-building in the Borderlands is the common denominator of the main representatives of Mexican-American ethnic literature: Gloria Anzaldua, Richard Rodriguez and Dagoberto Gilb. The Latino neighborhood is the focus of Sandra Cisneros' exploration of the deeply rooted struggle for survival and affirmation of identity, especially on the part of women, who fight against financial precariousness, the hostility of the social environment and of their own patriarchal tradition. The experience of three generations of Cuban women, their memories, real, negotiated or acquired, of a native land which has fascinated and/or scarred them for life form the fictional space where novelist Cristina Garcia interrogates the Cuban ongoing transition to American realities.

Cristina Cheveresan's insightful study of ethnic American fiction represents a tour de force both in scope and in depth. The author uses a wealth of theoretical and fictional resources to describe hyphenated identities and destinies and, in so doing, offers a documented, reader friendly narrative, valuable for academic audiences as well as for ethnic fiction aficionados.

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