

Begoña Simal, ed. 2011: *Selves in Dialogue: A Transethnic Approach to American Life Writing*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. 255 pp. ISBN: 978-90-420-3398-6.

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Selves in Dialogue “can be accurately described as a multifarious collection of transethnic explorations of American life writing”, states Begoña Simal, its editor, in her introductory chapter (13). And many of the words included in this sentence describe the most important aspects of this collection of essays: it deals with selves (self-writing in autobiographical narrative), transethnicity and establishing dialogues (that is, each essay takes a comparative or contrastive view of at least two different cultural traditions), dialogues that cultivate a spirit of “mixing rather than segregating” (13).

The meaning of transethnic, to begin with, requires clarification, since similar terms such as postethnic, cross-ethnic, and inter-ethnic are likewise poised to claim a prominent position in ethnic studies these days. In her recent essay, ‘The Challenge of Going Transethnic’, Simal (2011) herself proposes the use of ‘transethnic’ as the term that both captures the crucial idea of ‘crossing’ ethnic boundaries and/or ‘color lines’ and, more importantly, suggests a problematization of the term ‘ethnic’ while not erasing the concept altogether. In the particular context of this book, ‘transethnic’ reflects at once the comparative approach of this volume, but it also suggests a critical, revisionist agenda regarding ethnicity. And this reviewer welcomes such a comparative approach, which creates bridges and cultural connections between the many voices that compose the chorus of American Literature. In many ways, this book seems to respond to critical views that have argued for the need to transcend group-specific approaches to ethnic literatures. Paul Lauter’s defence of a comparativist model for the study of American Literature (1991) is acknowledged as an inspiration for this collection (2011: 10). But I also hear responses to Werner Sollors’ views against obsessive ethnic essentialisms and their resulting isolationist, group-by-group approaches that emphasize cultural heritage within the particular, and somewhat idealized group —at the expense of dynamic interaction and syncretism. As a matter of fact, I would argue, with Shirley Neuman (1992), that challenges to the dominant/classic theories of autobiography have led, in the recent past, to a number of different poetics of the genre, which seek to describe how particular group identities function in the discursive creation of the ‘self’ in autobiographies by African Americans, Latinas/os, Native Americans and other ethnic groups. The problem with

these theories of group identity is that they are constructed around a very specific and monologic category ('Native', 'Black', 'Chicana/o', and so on), and, thus, could end up being reductive, for they engage in an essentialism of otherness which fails to account for complicities, overlaps, and commonalities between the different groups. Such commonalities (or the absence thereof) are what *Selves in Dialogue* is most interested in seeking. For the nine essays that constitute the volume apply the very much needed comparative lens across ethnic groups to the study of authors from different cultural backgrounds, while some also incorporate dialogues between traditional, mainstream texts (such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* or Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*) and other, less canonized life-writing expressions.

Jeffrey Gray's opening chapter, 'Identity Cards: Autobiography and Critical Practice', is an exception, for his comparative exploration does not limit itself to two particular authors or texts, but extends to an overview of the "autobiographical turn" in scholarly writing of recent decades. The chapter focuses on a sampling of critical works by authors, male and female, and of various ethnicities, exploring autobiography not as it appears in memoirs or novels, but rather as it has begun to inhabit, over the past two decades, scholarly articles or books, impregnated with statements of "situatedness, of self-interpellation and self-affiliation" (21) —what Gray calls "identity cards". This is an essay very much in line with some of those included in the volume *Confessions of the Critics*, edited by H. Aram Veeseer in 1996, which evidences the confessional mode adopted by much recent literary criticism that has moved from the High Theory of the 1970s and 80s, with its densely philosophical or impersonal tenor, language, and style, to the more experiential, subjective tenor and language of autobiography.

In Ana Manzanás's essay 'Self and Nation in Franklin's *Autobiography* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*', these works are studied side by side, thus bridging not only 'Anglo' and 'ethnic' literatures, but also the tradition of life writing as a story of success, with that of postmodern autobiography. In developing her parallel vision of self and nation in these two texts, Manzanás draws from Mikhail Bakhtin's and Homi Bhabha's theories in order to prove how both authors inscribe themselves into the 'narration of the nation' through the wide gateway of autobiography, yet chronicle their 'doubleness' in radically different ways. Contrary to what one often finds in contrastive readings of white and ethnic texts, Manzanás does not sanctify the ethnic text at the cost of undermining the Franklinitian classic, but places both alongside the historical and social context in which they were produced.

'Ethnic Authorship and the Autobiographical Act', co-written by Rachel Ihara and Jaime Cleland, analyzes one instance of Native American and one of Asian American life writing from the beginning of the twentieth century: Zitkala-Sa's 'Impressions of an Indian Childhood' (1900) and other short stories by the same author, and Sui Sin Far's 'Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian' (1912). Although little known, these two writers were pioneering American authors who helped pave the way for future minority writing, the authors of the essay claim. Moreover, through autobiography each

writer tried to convince the sceptical reader that the roles of 'ethnic' subject and artist were not mutually exclusive.

Another of the essays that reveals to the reader ignored, neglected, or lesser-known writers is David Río's 'Autobiographical Writing in the Sin State: Latina and Basque American Perspectives', which focuses on 'Nevada literature' (159). Río resorts to a comparative analysis of the political works of three Basque American authors, all three belonging to the same Laxalt family, and a Latina writer, Emma Sepúlveda. Particular attention is paid to the way in which the Laxalts and Sepúlveda address issues such as self-representation, identity formation, the descent-consent tensions, and the private-public conflict. The four texts analyzed in this essay, Río contends, are concerned with the need to reconcile the immigrant heritage with the reality of modern-day American life, and, more specifically, with the demands of American politics in Nevada.

Three more Latina/o authors, Esmeralda Santiago, Junot Díaz, and Julia Álvarez are compared and contrasted in Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz's essay 'Puerto Rican and Dominican Self-Portraits and their Frames.' The 'frames' of the title are the various boundaries that mainstream culture demarcates for these bicultural authors, and to which each has chosen to adhere for various cultural, social and reading market reasons. In fact, while Manzanas focuses her essay on how Kingston departs from the tradition of the classical Western autobiography represented by Franklin, Ibarrola is interested in showing how the three fictional autobiographies he analyzes —Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Díaz's *Drown*, and Álvarez's *¡Yo!*— owe much to the traditional patterns of the 'forefathers' of the genre in the New World, and to their 'utopian blueprints'. Finally, Gloria Anzaldúa scholars will certainly welcome the new analysis of *Borderlands / La Frontera*, done this time in dialogue with Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in Anna Brígido-Corachán's essay 'Native Journeys of Self-Figuration'; the grounds for comparison being their similar portrayal of how individual and communal histories are intertwined in indigenous memoirs and testimonies. However, while Momaday calls for 'af-filiation' (rather than filiation), Anzaldúa mystifies her Aztec heritage, a strategy that sometimes ends up reinforcing the dominant narrative of Mexican nationalism.

A comparative analysis of divergent migrant subjects is convincingly carried out by Brenda R. Smith in her essay 'The Construction of American Subjectivity in African American Migration and European Immigrant Autobiographies.' While she focuses on migration narratives in the early nineteenth century following Boelhower's classic critical model of a three-step trajectory (Old Culture, New Culture and Syncretisation Moments), she does not limit that model to European immigrant narratives (those by Mary Antin and Marcus Eli Ravage), but applies the model also to African migrant autobiographies (James Weldon Johnson's and Zora Neale Hurston's). The narrative themes and strategies that Johnson and Hurston employ to construct the identity mark 'American', Smith contends, parallel those used by nineteenth-century European immigrant autobiographers. Moreover, she sees a clear difference between antebellum and postbellum slave narratives, which leads her to construct a new critical paradigm for the analysis of

the *African American Migration Autobiography*, a subgenre she distinguishes within the African American autobiographical tradition. Another unusual comparison, this time between “two ostensibly antithetical writers” (133) such as Paul Auster and Samuel R. Delany, is made by José Liste in his essay on what he calls their “double narratives” (132-158), where he focuses on the doublings of memory and writing as shared themes and motifs in the autobiographical writings of these two New Yorkers. In their self-conscious, postmodern narratives, Liste explains, Auster and Delany exploit the dual temporal and thematic articulation that autobiography relies on —past and present; life and writing— in order to respect more fully the very notion of the autobiographical as experience in writing and writing as experience. Liste builds cunning bridges between Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* and Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water*, mainly around the dense allusiveness and intertextuality of both texts, memoirs “not only of part of a life but of a life of reading, writing and translating” (144), and around both texts being reflexions on the “metaphysical conundrums of memory” (146) that “refuse final coherence or unified meaning” (145).

The essay that closes the book belongs to an ever-growing field of interest within American Studies: food studies. In her essay on two ‘food memoirs’, Paula Torreiro discusses the symbolic uses of food and culinary scenes in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava* and Leslie Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*. The comparative analysis of eating rituals, recipes, commensality and other food-related matters opens the way for a comparison between Arab-American and Chinese-American identities and their self-representations in writing. Owing to its myriad varieties of symbolic meanings and connotations, Torreiro contends, “the trope of food is fundamental for the formation of the self, the building of communal identity, and the preservation of collective memory” (209).

As Begoña Simal states, the transethnic approach proposed in this collection does not imply erasing the very difference and diversity that makes American autobiographies thrilling to read and study. Group-specific research of an intra-ethnic nature should and will continue to thrive. And yet, when one looks at the critical literature in the field of American Studies, one does perceive that the transnational, transethnic, and transgender approaches to American literature are finally gaining their well-deserved status, after decades of excessive pigeon-holing of intra-ethnic literary expression. As a matter of fact, some similar volumes have been published recently, such as *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (2006), whose author, David Cowart, shows immigrant writers drawing inspiration from and contributing to the Western literary tradition. In writing a book organized around the dominant tropes and formal elements of diverse immigrant fiction, Cowart also demolishes the walls of ghettos erected by the kind of scholarship that is mainly guided by group identity politics. So, instead of relegating immigrants from Caribbean and Pacific Islands to “ethnic laundries” (Ferens 2010: 130), Cowart reads ethnic writers such as Julia Alvarez, Cristina García and Jamaica Kincaid alongside Hoffman, Nabokov and Bellow, making multiple cross-references to Western and ancient classics. A number of classic volumes on life writing published since the

1990s —reviewed by Simal herself in the bibliographical essay mentioned above (Simal, 2011)—, if not exactly so dialogical and comparativist as *Selves in Dialogue*, have indeed fostered the comparative and revisionist agenda we are discussing here, and have thus contributed to a transethnic project of literary analysis. Other previous transatlantic, transethnic projects in the field of autobiography have come from German scholars, especially those led by Alfred Hornung, resulting in his two edited volumes of 2000 and 2010. And, finally, one further valuable contribution to this transethnic turn coming from Europe is that produced by Dominika Ferens in her *Ways of Knowing Small Places*, a book that brings together comparative analyses of autobiographical “fiction written at the interstices of cultures” (2010: 23) by Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid, Achy Obejas, Karen Tei Yamashita or Paule Marshall, to name but a few.

As tends to be the case in compilatory volumes, some of the articles are more compelling than others and, while most of them are extended dialogues between the compared texts with intertwined tandem analyses (as is the case with Ihara and Leland’s, Liste’s, Ibarrola’s, Manzanara’s, Smith’s or Torreiro’s essays), others are parallel readings of two or more texts, with a lesser dialogical discourse, which choose to leave the exercise in comparative analysis for the concluding paragraphs (as is the case with the essays of Rio or Brígido-Corachán). In all cases, however, *Selves in Dialogue* is a highly recommendable book for life writing scholars, but it is also a valuable reading for a wider spectrum of scholars interested in ethnicity. Indeed, I myself found *Selves in Dialogue* particularly refreshing and a very outstanding contribution to the field.

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