

Transnational Women's Writing: A Book Review Article of New Work by Fu and Parker and Young

Karen Ferreira-Meyers
University of Swaziland

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Karen FERREIRA-MEYERS

**Transnational Women's Writing:
A Book Review Article of New Work by Fu and Parker and Young**

In this article, I review Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu's 2012 *Transgressive Transcripts: Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Women's Writing* and Adele Parker's and Stephenie Young's 2013 *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women's Writing*. Both books are about contemporary women's writing from perspectives of transculturality, gender, race, class, sexuality, and geography. While Fu discusses the works of Chinese-Canadian women writers who can be considered transnational through both personal identity and their writing and underlines issues of "deviant" sexuality, contributors to Parker's and Young's volume cover a larger array of transnational authors from those living and working in the U.S. to those in Europe.

Fu focuses on the work of SKY Lee, Larissa Lai, Lydia Kwa, and Evelyn Lau (the capitalized first name of Lee is an acronymic rendition of her given names — Sharon Kwan Ying — which is how the author is referred to). Fu sets out to investigate the "hidden transcripts" employed by subaltern Chinese-Canadian women to resist domination. These groups do so by using different representations of sexuality and textuality "in a commitment to undermining long-established and generally unquestioned forms of sexual normativity" and Fu subdivides these transgressive transcripts into spatial ones (2). In her methodological discussion, Fu explains her objective to show that Chinese-Canadian women writers at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium do not attempt to speak for or to give voice to a collective Chinese-Canadian identity, but want to carve a unique space for showcasing distinct and diverse notions of femaleness, body, and sexuality. Fu also discusses the history of Asian American studies and the route followed to today's bifurcations between Asian US-American and Chinese Canadian, so that particularities of both literatures can be identified and analyzed.

Fu concentrates in each of her chapters on an individual writer with similar arguments: these women's writings promote culturally heterogeneous, racially hybrid, and historically and genealogically inclusive visions of a feminine utopic or dystopic site commingling such pervasive motifs as lesbian intertextuality, female bonding, and a synchronized maternal genealogy. Fu opposes poststructuralist readings of the body which posit solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism. By showing the interplay between the female body, textual production, and sexual representation, Fu counterbalances Michel Foucault's reduction of the woman's sex-saturated body to an unmediated monolith and Luce Irigaray's and Monique Wittig's ahistorical and essentialist theoretical approaches of the female body. According to Fu, Chinese-Canadian women writers — in full knowledge of historical disjunctions and conjunctions and employing various literary strategies and exposing different sexual tropes — use defiant characters which embody the "bad subject" (Nguyen 150). Fu's critique and re-assessment of feminist theory is a valuable tool for questioning the hegemony of Western discourse in Asian Canadian studies and beyond. While rejecting Julia Kristeva's essentialized, reduced representation of Chinese women as infantile and primitive beings, Fu employs the theory of abjection and supplements this theoretical and psychoanalytical framework with Elizabeth Grosz's theories of corporeality, correlations between body and space, and bodily re-inscription. For Fu, bodies function discursively as "agents of knowledge, an intensely energetic locus for all cultural production" (11).

In her chapter one Fu concentrates on Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* and deals with how migrant female bodies perform in various locations. The novel tells the story of Wong Gwei Chang, the first member of the Wong family in Canada who breaks the law by initiating a sexual relationship with Kelora Chen, a half-First Nations, half-Chinese girl. After the illegitimate encounter with Kelora, Gwei Chang's betrayal of the First Nations woman in favor of an "authentic" Chinese wife directly from China leads to a series of family tragedies. Fu demonstrates how Lee's narrative extends the parameters of displacement through a genealogy of female characters transgressing normality. The storyline is a multi-generational saga against the backdrop of the growth of Vancouver's Chinatown and literary magical realism. She situates Lee's novel interracial and ancestral hybridity in the writer's previous work and positions her analysis against earlier critical reviews of Lee's work which

concentrated on the novel as a political paradigm of Chinese collective identity or as an Orientalist reproduction of the writer's self-exoticization. Fu discusses space in the section entitled "Gendering Chinatown: The Exotic/Erotic Spatial Construction of Chinatown" and posits that Vancouver's Chinatown — imbued with historical and contemporary meanings — provides the order and organization which link otherwise unrelated bodies. She quotes Roy Miki who argued that Asian Canadian writers employ the act of deterritorialization through writing as "a viable method for resisting assimilation, for exploring variations in form that undermine aesthetic norms, for challenging homogenizing political systems, and for articulating subjectivities that emerge from beleaguered communities" (118). This chapter also gives the reader an overview of the arrival and presence of Chinese women in Canada and the USA. Fu talks about early immigration with the first Chinese woman to arrive in San Francisco in February 1848 being Marie Seise, soon followed by Ah Choi, who first worked as a prostitute and ended her life running a brothel. In Canada, the arrival of the first Chinese women occurred in the late nineteenth century and soon after the Chinese Exclusion Act made it impossible for resident Chinese workers to bring their families over. That Act was only repealed in 1947 and it was only in the early 1950s that Canadian-born Chinese seized the opportunity to pursue a literary career.

In chapter two Fu posits that Lai's work is exemplary of Chinese-Canadian women writers' recurring themes: boundary-crossing in various representational forms and different strategies of rewriting (her)story through women's sexual and textual solidarity. Contrary to Lee's text, Lai revivifies Chinese and Western histories to accommodate complex issues of diaspora, history, hyphenation, and sexuality (in US-American English spelling and usage it is "Chinese American writer" while in Canadian English it is "Chinese-Canadian writer"). Lai's novel is a morphological transgression inasmuch it brings together many discourses and variations of bodily presence. The central figure manipulating the narrative in Lai's novel is the fox spirit, gendered as female, who is a trickster inhabiting women's bodies and minds. Here, Fu identifies a link with traditional Chinese folktales: the re-animation of women through the fox's ability to transform herself is "a metaphor of the Other attempting to breathe vitality into an assimilated Self" (60). Cross-dressing, images of doubles, naming and cross-naming, intertextuality, and parody are further topics investigated. Further, Fu employs Marjorie Garber's postulates in *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* to elaborate on how Asian Canadian authors attract the reader's attention to costumes, clothing and dressing, which like naming and cross-naming render self-representation explicit. In Lai's novel, the fox's game of dressing underscores the novel's motif of transvestism. While in the traditional and intertextual stories of the *Strange Tales of Liaozhai*, the fox spirit in the female form incubate in men, Lai's story challenges this convention by focusing on courtesans and nuns who are "puzzled by [her] lean, squarish jaw and plain dark robes that betrayed nothing but [her] amusement with the game of dressing. What seemed to relieve and reassure them was the sight of [her] feet, their phallic length" (66). A postmodern trickster, Lai's fox has to transgress against certain norms in order to survive in an oppressive, restrictive, patriarchal, and racist world.

While the previous chapters aligned theoretical analysis with various historical trajectories and elaborated on sexualized textual productions within spatial/diasporic (Lee) and morphological (Lai) parameters, in chapter three Fu explores the internalization of "boundaries" and lesbian views within a psychoanalytical landscape. Fu's objective is to show how Kwa's novel *This Place Called Absence* (and indeed her whole oeuvre) combat the situating of queer writing in the dominant, now canonized "minority" discourse of white male homosexuality. The novel's polyphonic narrative interweaves four lives separated by a century of history and explores the struggles of the four narrators living lives of forbidden sexuality and cultural rupture. In Fu's opinion Kwa views lesbianism, women's bonding, and intertextuality as a way of rejecting patriarchal components in heterosexual models of subjectivity.

The fourth and last chapter contains Fu's analysis of Lau's work. She notes that scholarship about Asian female sexuality andotics have largely excluded adolescent, subcultural desire. To supplement this missing discourse, Fu focuses on Lau's representations of deviance. According to Celine P. Shimizu, hypersexual pain and pleasure in Lau's literary work "is a network of social forces that ground [her] legibility in culture, as terms for self-recognition and as condition of social marginalization that leads to opportunities for creative self-invention" (17). Analyzing Lau's

autobiographical *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1989) and her confessional memoir *Inside Out: Reflections on a Life So Far* (2001), Fu explores deviance inherent in subcultural discourses (drug addiction and prostitution) which articulate sexuality on various levels. Lau captures truths, realities, and lived experiences in her accounts of countless incidents of rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. According to Fu, "in *Runaway*, Lau writes from the inside out, whereas in *Inside Out* she is on the outside looking in. This ostensibly self-contradictory blurring of authoritative viewpoint in effect undermines inside-outside demarcations and private-public binarisms in the name of the freedom to re-shape experience through writing" (124). Fu's *Transgressive Transcripts* puts Chinese-Canadian women's writing on the map because Chinese-Canadian writers have long "languished in the wilderness [and have had to wait] so long to find an academic home" (Goellnicht 3). Fu's work responds to the objective "to excavate hidden female voices" and "to explore the unhyphenated gendered and sexualized space between the two terms 'Chinese' and 'Canadian'" (21). Although her original idea was not to address the issues of race and ethnicity, Fu devotes some time on these notions as they are linked to sex and class in the novels she analyzes.

Adele Parker and Stephenie Young brought together eleven articles in *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women's Writing* and wrote an introduction to the volume in which they explain the notion of transnationalism as "the movement across or beyond prescribed cultural and national spaces without privileging these spaces" (1). Their objectives can be summarized in the following questions: how do transnational practices affect women's literary production and what is the reception of these innovations, how does gender inflect the construction of trans/national identities and histories, and how are women writing themselves into the new world order? Parker and Young want to investigate the conception and role of transnationalism amidst the increased need for writing beyond the national to address questions of gender, identity, literary aesthetics, and the discursive spaces in which women attempt to negotiate their experiences of today's world. To do so, the editors divided the volume in three sections: "Bodies of Female Experience and Experiment," "Trauma, Resistance, Nation," and "Limits of Transnationalism." Parker and Young intend to show that transnationalism is at a crossroads as it is used to identify and celebrate local identity and the multifarious approaches to writing and reading the self, but also to convey those interpretations to a global audience without losing the unique specificities which make us human. The focus on women's writing is explained in their introduction: formal experimentation and innovation are useful tools for the expression of experiences which lie outside the normative categories of affiliation and identity. The heterogeneity of the texts discussed in the volume indicates the diversity of transnational women's experience, as well as some surprising commonalities.

The first section has three articles: Flore Chevallier discusses erotics and corporeality in the work of Theresa Hak and Kyung Cha based on Hélène Cixous's thought, Liamar Durán Almarzan analyzes the work of Josefina Báez, and Johannes Göransson analyzes Aase Berg's poetry. Durán Almarza uses the concept of border as a metaphor of the lived experience of the ways race, class, sexuality, and gender converge and that border consciousness as developed in Gloria Anzaldúa's works. Göransson looks at the concept of the grotesque as a form of resistance to the standardized body and language and reads contemporary Berg's poetry as a form of "antibody" to the national language and natural body of the Swedish welfare state of the late twentieth century. Contributors to the second of the volume engage with the question of how nationalism and literature come into dialogue in a transnational setting. Anastasia Valassopoulos's article is an analysis of Assia Djebar's novel and Valassopoulos argues that Djebar uses the trope of seduction to take the reader through the memories, facts, reflections, and recreations of the trauma of Algerian colonial history. Next, novels by Gayl Jones and Dorothy Allison are analyzed by Tamara Lea Spira who focuses on "memory boom literatures" and their foregrounding in neoliberal (re)colonization, Black labor, and traumatic memories as a reflection of the US-American social system. The third article in this section is by Ruben Murillo who discusses state violence in the Chicano community in the USA and the last article is by Stephenie Young on Dubravka Ugrešić's autobiographical work about the Yugoslav wars and exile.

Articles in the third section of *Transnationalism and Resistance* account for a variety of ways in which national literatures move beyond state borders and interconnect in a transnational space through themes such as gender and history. Adele Parker analyzes the construction of a transnational

European identity in the novels of Brina Svitm, Maria-Theresia Holub compares the works Sandra Cisneros with those of Emine Sevgi Özdamar in their respective minority environments, and Ulrike Tancke discusses contemporary British Women's fiction on/about (im)migration. The volume includes an epilogue in which Pavithra Narayanan investigates the place of women's writing in the Indian publishing industry and its relationship with globalization.

In sum, scholarship presented in the volumes is about the narration of movement across and/or beyond cultural and national spaces and both are indispensable reading in undergraduate and graduate classes and they are also recommended for the interested general reader.

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Reviewer's profile: Karen Ferreira-Meyers is coordinator of modern languages and linguistics at the University of Swaziland. Her interests in scholarship include women's autofiction, crime fiction, and distance and e-learning. In addition to numerous articles, Ferreira-Meyers's book publications include *L'Autofiction d'Amélie Nothomb, Calixthe Beyala et Nina Bouraoui* (2012). E-mail: <karenferreirameyers@gmail.com>