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Transculturation : writing beyond dualism

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Conclusion

In this study I focused on the literary texts of three Chinese American women writers. I read these texts within an interdisciplinary framework of immigrant history, feminism, and diaspora. As I demonstrated, the transition from a binary to “trans-” movement can be detected in all three novels. This transition not only bridges cultural distances between Chinese and American cultures horizontally, but also generates interplay with various cultural motifs.

From Dualism to Transculturation

In this study, three literary works by Chinese American women writers served as media for the expression of dualism. With dualism as a starting point for the conceptualization of Chinese American experience today, I showed how the two sides of dualism interacted and engaged in the process of transculturation. The transition from dualism to transculturation forms and shapes the literary narratives of immigrant experience. This has not only defined Chinese Americanness in the texts, but, more fundamentally, it has also formed an angle from which to think culture and identity generally.

This study contributes to a better understanding of how depictions of Chinese American immigrants coped with the dual conditions of their cultural background. Three main concerns determine my analysis. The first recognizes a duality caused by cultural clashes as a common condition imposing itself upon immigrants and the generation after. My study investigates dual meanings from a bicultural perspective. The figurative movement of dual forces defines the configurations of the protagonists’ identity. As I demonstrated, the interactions between the two sides of dualism are inevitable when a person’s home culture is opened to new influences and pressures after migration. My reading,

Conclusion

based on dualism as a core characteristic of these narratives, established a temporal, personal, and spatial connection with history. Dualism manifested itself two times in Chapter One, on “Rift in Time: Tracing (Post)Memory in *Hunger*.” This temporal dualism referred to a memory brought to the present from an immigrant past. In the following chapter, on “Rift in the Self: Exploring the Inner Self in *Hunger*,” the two parts of dualism were embodied by the protagonists, whose split/double selves were in an internal contention and ambivalence of polarities. In the chapters “Searching for a Way Out in *Bone*” and “A Narrative Beyond Symbols in *Bone*,” dualism addressed spatial metaphors of border-crossing. These metaphors transgressed the symbolic space of bone, paper, neologism, and the space of Chinatown. In the two chapters “An Allegorical Reading of *The Woman Warrior*” and “Ambiguity in *The Woman Warrior*,” the dual nature of dualism signified implicit connotations of meaning in a more abstract sense. This meaning was both literal and metaphoric, and both literary and realistic. My close reading thus produced allegorical and ambiguous meanings that spread beyond the textual border into immigrant society.

The second concern of my analysis examines the interplay of dualities. Identity is rephrased through interaction between binary positions, where that interaction alters the traditional static perception of identity dynamically. It resists any totality of acceptance or assimilation on the one hand, and of rejection or repulsion on the other. My reading of the three narratives disclosed a series of acts of negotiation under the motifs of memory, self, symbols, place, and meanings (allegorical and ambiguous meanings). Dualism gestates transculturation. Interaction and mutual nourishment between the two constituent sides within each motif provoked my third concern: transcultured meaning. With these popular immigrant motifs as its components (memory, self, symbols, place, and meanings), transculturation gave rise to new meanings in bicultural conditions. It produced allegorical meaning along explicit trajectories of history and reality, home and host country, and ambiguous meanings along more implicit trajectories. My study thus demonstrates how each novel constitutes a literary “contact zone.” These contact zones are permeated with hybridized meanings, irresolvable differences, and contradictions, which ultimately alter the meaning of all contact cultures, and develop new forms of culture. Each of the involved cultures can find appealing elements, whether familiar or transformed, from this new

culture. My final chapter emphasized that the incompatibility of binary oppositions could not be overcome. It could only be constantly and continuously negotiated, reconciled, and mediated. The indeterminacy resisted totality or essentialism. This resembled and reinforced the working mechanism of transculturation.

Dualisms, and the transculturation in which dualisms result, are thematic and structural preoccupations that underlie the fictional works in my study. Transculturation transgresses various types of binary oppositions. The narratives offer new concepts and conceptualizations of this transgression. The writers' trans-textual writing from one literary tradition to another parallels their thematic concern for transculturality. This two-leveled "trans-" act suggests flexibility in the field of both literature and culture. Thus, the writings go beyond textual borders and have practical significance for contemporary immigrant societies. This movement, in turn, reflects the active nature of Chinese American social space.

Why "Transculturation"?

In their study "Psychological Impact of Biculturalism," LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton name five models to describe cross-cultural communication and complexity: assimilation, acculturation, alternation, multiculturalism, and fusion (396). These models suggest adaptability and flexibility in a person's acquisition of cultural competence. They show various degrees of negotiation, loyalty, and involvement with the two cultures in contact. However, in LaFromboise's, Coleman's, and Gerton's formulation, none of these models presents itself as a creative agent.¹ Some even submit to the simulations of the American ideal model. Obviously, these different models can be found in the characters

¹ According to LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton, in the assimilation model, acquiring a new cultural identity "involves some loss of awareness and loyalty to one's culture of origin." The acculturation model implies the individual will always be identified as a member of the minority culture, though he or she may be a competent participant in the majority culture. In the alternation model, the individual can alter his or her behavior according to the needs of a particular social context. The multicultural model promotes a pluralistic approach and addresses the feasibility of cultures maintaining distinct identities. The fusion model represents the assumptions of the melting-pot theory and suggests a shared cultural space of economy, politics, and geography (397-401).

Conclusion

of my study too, but they are not what the narratives want to establish. I have chosen “transculturation” to describe the development of both Chinese American culture and identity. Each text in my study describes the transcendent character(s) and event(s) that infused the two cultures, and the two identities into a new form. My new comprehension of this cultural phenomenon in specific Chinese American circumstances revives the “old,” “foreign” concept of transculturation.²

Compared with the models in LaFromboise’s, Coleman’s, and Gerton’s analysis, I conclude that my reading demonstrates four advantages to reading Chinese American cultures through the concept of transculturation. First, transculturation does not negate a loss, or assimilation, of the home culture, but incorporates them as an inevitable by-product of cultural hybridity. That is to say, transculturation embraces both the positive and the negative sides of the cultural changes. In this sense, the binary opposition inherent in the dual cultural background of Chinese Americans harmonizes into a force that moderates the unequal power relations between the two cultures. Second, transculturation is powerful enough to generate something new, which makes it full of possibilities, potentialities, and heterogeneities. This vitality has its far-reaching influence on both source cultures, as well as encouraging further changes in the socio-political domain. Thus, transculturation, though a general term used to describe cultural transition, can be redefined by the specificity of individual groups and persons. Third, transculturation recognizes the ongoing process of negotiation and contestation in culture and identity construction. In this process, both cultures are changed. The fluidity fits with Chinese American communities, which are also in states of change and shift. Lastly, transculturation mobilizes the two source cultures into a cross-cultural experience, which develops enriched, hybridized new forms of culture. This, in turn, continues, and even deepens, the heterogeneity of American culture. The affirmation of these features helps readers achieve a full understanding of what is involved in Chinese American transcultural discourses.

² As I made clear in the Introduction, “transculturation” is a term coined in the 1940s. It is originally used to describe cultural changes in Latin American context. So I regard its use in contemporary Chinese American community as an “old,” “foreign” concept.

In my analysis, attention was directed to discordant and unsmooth narratives of displaced, disembodied individuals. On the one hand, the “irregularities” can be construed negatively as the consequence of exclusion and marginalization of those defined as “others,” or as outsiders. On the other hand, it can be hailed as a source of diversity and heterogeneity. This irregular development generated forces to relocate and embody subjectivity. Taking the socio-historical, political, and racial/ethnic differences into account, the “incoherent” narration of the three novels not merely reflected the discursive concern of transculturation, but also demonstrated the complex and heterogeneous performance of Chinese American community.

Coping with Loss

In my study, while transculturation emerges from a historical narrative of domination and subordination, I emphasize its consequential creations from a dynamics of mixing and mingling. This dynamics evolves into the critical reception of elements from other cultures and the creation of a new cultural form. It signifies mutual interchanges of dual subjects and meanings, opening what Bhabha calls “third space.” As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, this space resisted the essentialist conceptualizations of the original cultural spaces. It brought to light the heterogeneous narratives of transcultural experiences. Thus, third space, a spatial metaphor, serves as a mode of narration that describes a productive force generating new possibilities. It subverts the dualistic categorization of binary positioning by reforming it into a hybridization of new diversities. In this sense, transculturation is an actively constructive process of adjustment to, and an overcoming of, loss. When loss is compensated by creation, it deconstructs hierarchal relationships and reconciles asymmetries of power. This reconciliation is significant, because, through it, the narrative displays individual particularity rather than implying a submission or a resistance to dominant discourse. This particularity challenges both hegemonic definitions and ethnic norms of cultural identity. It also subverts the image of Chinese American literature as imitating the dominant form, and its position in the American canon as an underdeveloped “other.”

The writers in my study develop a distinct technique to cope with loss. Their narratives develop themes from unilateral assimilation of

Conclusion

early models to the present transculturation. As Carmen Birkle says, “transculturation [...] can be used to describe [...] the rise of ethnic and women’s voices which actually crossed cultural, ethnic, and national borders” (6). The border-crossing of these writers’ voices takes place in relation to the *Bildungsroman* of their female protagonists. At first they are at a loss to voice what to do with their original cultural heritage. There are moments of confusion, rejection, and hesitation. Their personal struggle and inner conflict show that they are weighing how to choose in the dilemma. Gradually, they acquire their own identity, and grow up into independent and self-determined subjects. The *Bildungsroman* has subverted the monolithic presentation of them as “victims [...] being victimized by stupid white racists and then being reborn in acculturation and honorary whiteness” (Chan et al. xi-xii). The inevitable loss is compensated by the creation of a transcultural consciousness. This consciousness extends the double consciousness into an awareness of a hybrid self.

Angel Rama notes, “writers who practised transculturation registered the loss of the use of dialects [...]. They compensated for this by notoriously widening the regional semantic field and the syntactic order,” which results in “the consolidation of an artificial and literary language” (160). Chinese American writers adopt English as their native language. If there is anything lost when they use a language different from their parents’ to depict experiences out of that culture, they have compensated for it by retaining a few Chinese characters, traditions, or practices adapted in their special way. This technique reveals the specificity of their Chinese American perspectives. Alternatively, it also bears their cultural outlook toward both home and host culture.

Literary Characters of Transcultural Identity

This study shows how the dynamics of an ambivalent neither-nor state characterizes not only the culture to which the protagonists belong, but also their identities. Transculturation is closely related to the identity issue. Though I choose to use “transculturation” to conceptualize the development of Chinese American identity, I by no means intend to essentialize either the identity itself or its formation. Rather, my understanding of transculturation aims to confront a dominant discourse

that attempts to repress or neutralize the differences among marginalized cultures into a general reading of third world or of ethnic minorities.

The protagonists of the three texts in my study struggle to realize the American dream, to break away from confinement, or to attain subjectivity. Accordingly, each of them constructs his or her identity within the context of: 1) a promising dreamland to fulfill their desire; 2) an immigration history of marginalization and discrimination; 3) a struggle for an identity on the basis of an ambivalent recognition of the self. In whichever context, they live in a historical and cultural borderland where identity in all cases exists in plurality. The narratives emphasize the bordering situation by frequent boundary blurring and crossing, or a contrast of the two parts divided by the borderline. This emphasis intensifies the novels' perceptual dissonance of identity: the incongruity between a person's two inner selves (as in *Hunger*); between what is perceived from different ideologies and paradigms (as in all three novels, but especially in *Bone*); between the Chinese "I" and American "I" (as in *The Woman Warrior*). The characters' fate oscillates between these dichotomies, which posits a challenge to both sides of these dichotomies.

The protagonists are attentive to their identity dilemmas. Torn between the two cultures, they are continually frustrated in their endeavor to establish themselves as successful Americans. In their treatment of Chinese legacy, there is a clear line moving from disgusted repulsion or bewilderment to critical acceptance, and even to an effective manipulation with renewed interest. This tendency to move away from ethnic denial and forgetting manifests itself in their "struggle [...] to maintain a 'double citizenship' or a kind of 'double consciousness' through contact with homelands, home cultures, and families overseas" (Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan 7). I extend this "double citizenship" to a transcultured identity. However, since other influences always come into play, the new identity remains in the making. It constantly renews itself to best fit being Chinese American. In this process, the protagonists have subtly negotiated the contesting situation in which they find themselves. Their ever-new identity "copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (Anzaldúa qtd. in Torres 282). The Chinese American ethnic self accepts contradiction and ambiguity by transforming Chinese traditional values

Conclusion

into their vision of American liberal values. This trend amplifies new models of bicultural identity.

Each writer in my study has presented her own way of constructing identity, where the margins of those identities differ. In *Hunger*, Chang's characters display a strong unwillingness to be away from home. They integrate home culture to attain psychic recovery and re-creation. The reluctance to leave produces both an enriched understanding of self (as with Anna) and a split, thwarted identity (as with Tian). In contrast, *Bone's* protagonists (the second-generation protagonists especially) resolutely leave the discordant space of Chinatown to embrace a vision of an independent American future. In *The Woman Warrior*, there is no perfect union of identities. This novel foregrounds the idea of juxtaposition, which results in the narrator's ambivalent feeling toward her dual cultural self. In the three novels, the protagonists present a multiplicity of identity recognitions and constructions. The narrations demonstrate diversity even among characters from similar cultural backgrounds. The characters provide varied and interesting examples of how to negotiate conflicting aspects in their ideological, value, and belief systems from both sides of their hyphenated identity. The diverse patterns of their identity development point toward heterogeneity in their communities.

I use the concept of transculturation to illuminate the protagonists' identity evolvment. This concept works to challenge pre-fixed and essentialist conceptions. What my study makes clear is that the identities of the literary characters are not a product of cultural loss, but of cultural transformation. It is normal for senses of uncertainty, ambiguity, and indetermination to run through the formation of ethnic subjectivity in the characters. All three writers put into play transcultured, heterogeneous characters "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall 52). Chang's, Ng's, and Kingston's images of self-determination and self-affirmation move away from the stereotypes of submissive and exotic third world women in early representations, and the more recent ready-to-be-assimilated type.

More extensively, to trace the pattern of the writers' fictional portrayals of dualism, is, to a great extent, to witness what is going on in multicultural American society in general. The discussion of transcultural experience refers to the three writers' and their women characters' search for self-definition and for a place in a male- and

white-dominated society. In the process of identity formation in a cross-cultural environment, personal development can neither be separated from communal change, nor can the identity crisis in individual life be divorced from issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. As my study demonstrates, both personal development and the current communal changes are mutually dependent.