

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 2 (2010)

Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



Zhang Benzi, Asian Diaspora: Poetry in North America

Evangelos Roumeliotis

doi: [10.12681/syn.16525](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16525)

Copyright © 2010, Evangelos Roumeliotis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Benzi Zhang. *Asian Diaspora: Poetry in North America*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge. 2008. Pp. xvi + 177. £55.00 (Hb. and e-book).

The title of the book is slightly misleading, as one might probably expect a literary guide to Asian diaspora poetry in North America. Benzi Zhang, however, through a rich and diverse selection of texts from modern (post-war and onwards) Asian diaspora poetry, is engaged with the question of identity and explores in which ways the poetic corpus he studies challenges and scrutinises fundamental assumptions about identity.

Diasporic identity, Zhang stresses in his book, results from a “transrelation” between different cultural vectors. As he explains, transrelation is a permanent, dynamic and ambivalent process that is irreducible to “a simple combination of different cultural and historical elements” (13). Through this transrelation, identity emerges as a field of redefinition and of negotiation. This approach to identity comes into rupture with a more commonly accepted perception of identity as uniform, homogeneous and static. Zhang underscores nevertheless that the notion of transrelation should not be confused with that of hybridity, which is generally understood as a finalised mixture of diverse cultural aspects. At every opportunity, the author stresses that in diasporic identity the coexistence of different cultural elements constitutes an endless process, and the poems he examines bring to the fore precisely this constant questioning and redefinition of identity.

Through the process of transrelation, Zhang avers, Asian diaspora poetry defamiliarises notions that are traditionally associated with the question of identity, namely those of home, place and memory (chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively). But its challenging force can also be seen in the way it treats the exotic representation of the Oriental other by western discourse (chapter 6), as well as in its carnivalization of canonical western poetics (chapter 7). The thread binding these diverse chapters together is the argument that Asian diaspora poetry, although being written within a western context, cannot be interpreted through the prisms usually employed by western thought. The main reason for this is, Zhang argues following Edward Said, that diaspora poets are aware of at least two cultures, and, as a consequence, their experiences are formed through the interaction between these different cultural spheres—an interaction which does not allow identity to crystallise into something rigid or timeless.

It is within the framework of this transrelation, then, that Zhang studies the parameters which play a substantial role in the formation of identity. Starting with the notion of home, Zhang argues that in diasporic poetry it is not any more perceived and described as a singular, static and fixed place of residence, but it is redefined as a constant process of rehoming; this last “means to keep cultural continuity elsewhere and to engage in a continuous effort to write home out of the dislocation of life” (36). In other words, through its displacement, the diasporic subjects develop a paradoxical relationship to home: on the one hand, they are haunted by their origins, while at the same time they strive to establish that they belong elsewhere—they are haunted by the old home while hunting a new one, as Zhang puts it. On the other hand, unable to be fully assimilated into the new environment, the diasporic subjects try to maintain a connection to their origins, and consequently to yield a sense of belonging through a fragmented memory of the original home. Within diasporic identity, therefore, the home can only be defined by means of border-crossing, only “in relation to the increasing transnational interactions,” a fact that ultimately “challenges the overdetermined, canonised discourses on nation and home” (49-50).

The notion of place is studied in a similar manner: in contradistinction to an understanding of place as a singular location which binds the members of a community together, diaspora foregrounds “ethnic vacillation and cultural ambivalence” (53). In this way, locality loses the status of singularity and of homogeneity, and becomes, like home, a process of re-locating, of a simultaneous belonging in different places—something that deeply affects the formation of identity. For relocation might mean, on the one hand, as Zhang explains, that diasporas must suffer a series of displacements, which at some point might also threaten their identity; but on the other hand, their cultural characteristics are, through differentiation, intensified in the new environments, making them “more ‘Asian’ than they are in their original countries” (68). We are dealing with another paradox here, i.e. that, as far as the issue of location is concerned, identity emerges stronger and more self-conscious not within the place

of origin, as one would perhaps expect, but outside it, and, more precisely, through the pathway of displacement.

The role of memory is paramount here. Memory, too, is understood by Zhang as an ongoing process of self-making, “in which the speaker would follow his own ways to ‘cut’ and ‘stitch’ the past, shaping it into new self-representations” (75). As Zhang explains, in diasporic poetry memory “delivers more emotion than fact and more signification than knowledge” (86). This is an important aspect, for memory in this case does not consist in enumerating facts, nor is it a need to historically verify the real history of these facts, but it takes the form of constantly re-experiencing and re-interpreting the past, which comes to shape the present and to produce new self-representations again and again. Remembering (or re-membling, as Zhang spells it) the past is an act that stands up against the effacing force of amnesia – and amnesia here is not simply the result of the merciless passage of time, but is linked to certain cultural practices: on the one hand, to what is called “institutional forgetting” in the book (90), a sort of amnesia imposed by the dominant culture, which compels diasporic minorities to forget their past in the name of normal assimilation; but, on the other hand, the very same politics of amnesia typifies only a handful of elements from that past, which it then asks the diasporas to preserve in order to maintain their difference and confirm the existence of a multicultural society. In Zhang’s reading, though, Asian diaspora poetry resists this policy of cultural memory/amnesia by discovering *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), a term that Zhang borrows from Pierre Nora (88-89). Nora defines the *lieux de mémoire* as elements of a collective memorial heritage. However, Zhang argues that the use of memory in Asian diaspora poetry urges us to rethink what this heritage consists in, since these poets evoke in their writings collective memories which do not necessarily coincide with what the mainstream culture codifies and preserves as memorial heritage. Thus, by bringing forward an approach to memory which diverges from that of the “historical hegemony” (90), their poems are not simply a reminiscence of the past, but mostly and mainly a vehicle for activating cultural difference in the present.

In the second half of chapter 5, Zhang gives two successful examples of how memory is articulated by diaspora poetry in terms of cultural differentiation. The first example is based on Leong’s and Inada’s poetry, where memory is associated with Buddhist spirituality, and is articulated as a re-experiencing of the past through previous lives. In this case, Zhang tells us, the use of memory radically differs from the rationalistic approach of western thought, where the past comes back to memory by means of historical enumeration and empirical verification. Since memory cannot be anchored to verifiable facts and cannot be attached to a certain source, it is “diasporic and has no home” (95), as Zhang puts it. The second example concerns poetical and cultural memory. By re-experiencing the past, Zhang explains, the poet is connected to a cultural collectivity. A most significant aspect here is, quite similarly to the first example, that this kind of memory does not have to do with the reminiscence of what the poet has lived and experienced as an individual, but it rather takes the form of communication between the poet and a shared cultural tradition.

In the last two chapters of the book there is a slight shift in Zhang’s perspective, from the elements involved with the issue of identity (home, place, memory) to the way in which diaspora poetry uses features of the western discourse on identity, in order to question them and to propose a different approach. More precisely, Zhang explores how Asian diaspora poetry subverts the orientalist representation of the East as exotic (chapter 6), and how it exploits the poetic modes of the West in order to carnivalise the dominant culture (chapter 7).

In relation to the first topic, that of the exoticisation of the Other by western imperialist discourse, the author argues, providing convincing evidence, that the Asian diaspora occupies a privileged position that helps it cast into doubt western prejudice: for, by living within a western context, and consequently by moving “between different systems of cultural signification” (112), it necessarily adopts the viewpoint of the Other in order to represent itself. This results, as Zhang concisely puts it, in the formation of “new generations of the Other who are no longer silent, mysterious or inscrutable, but capable of self-analysis, self-representation in western style and self-translation in English” (113). Thus, a radical redistribution of the discourse on otherness is brought about: the discourse of exoticism is invoked as a means for casting into doubt the prejudices it consists of. It is a case of “auto-ethnography,” according to Mary Pratt’s apposite term, where the subaltern Other represents itself in

response to the ethnographic picture drawn by the West; diasporic auto-ethnography, Zhang suggests, takes the form of articulating the exotic features of the East in the assertive, self-confident manner of the West, and therefore “both acknowledges and challenges western ideological viewpoints” (117).

A similar line of thought permeates the following chapter which examines the carnivalistic potency of Asian diaspora poetry. Based on Bakhtin’s theory of the literary carnival, Zhang endeavours to track down aspects of diaspora poetry with carnivalistic power, in the sense that they are opposed to and challenge a homogenising, hegemonic, canonical cultural centre. In the case at hand, hegemonic culture is expressed in standard English, which implies the elimination of marginal idioms and poetic styles. Zhang focuses on examples of poems with “loosened order and structure” (125), features mainly related to the carnival vernacular, as well as on poems that innovate in form and style, or experiment with language, e.g. by introducing elements from pidgin—generally treated with low respect—alongside the standard language.

The chapter on the carnival is the least persuasive of the book, as it seems to me that it condenses the main weaknesses of Zhang’s overall argumentation. My main reservation is against a tendency to demonise, we could say, western thought. Although most of Zhang’s analysis evolves around the dynamics of transrelation, he does not always avoid—and less so in the chapter on the carnival—positioning western culture *tout court* as hegemonic and totalising. To be sure, many facets of western culture, like colonialism or elitism, can buoy this approach; however many other considerable aspects are left out. The carnival itself is perhaps the most conspicuous example: not only does the carnival—and particularly its expression that has served as the basis for Bakhtin’s theory—originate in western tradition, but one should also keep in mind that it is in works of western literature that Bakhtin reads a carnivalistic questioning of authority. Of course, this does not eliminate the possibility of applying Bakhtin’s theory to non-western literatures, but it also renders rather problematic the overall identification of western culture with totalisation. The same can be said on the subject of poetic innovation. Zhang’s argument does not make clear whether innovation in poetic form and style results from cultural transrelation, or if it is a distinctive feature of literary writing in general. These weaknesses become forcefully manifest in the example of the Philippine José García Villa: Zhang’s claim that Villa’s innovative writing, and especially his experimentations with punctuation, must be associated with his diasporic identity is rather feeble, since it bluntly disregards the factor of poetic creativity.

Quite similarly, certain reservations can be raised at Zhang’s inclination to homogenise Asian diasporas. More precisely, the gathering of as various and as diverse Asian cultures, as the Indian, the Chinese, the Japanese and others, under the same rubric appears to be somewhat problematic, especially in the first half of the book, where the criterion of diasporic experience often functions at the expense of cultural particularities. As a result, Zhang’s reading of Asian diaspora poetry seems to be carried by the theoretical work that has been done on diaspora during the last three decades, thus undermining the dimension of ‘Asianness’ in the poetic corpus he studies. Thus, Zhang’s account of the notions of home and location may raise the question: what really makes Asian diaspora poetry differ from other instances of diaspora poetry, like, for example, European?

The problem, however, is successfully tackled in those parts of the book which engage with the texts themselves, and rely less on an *a priori* theoretical ground. The examples of Buddhist memory as well as the autoethnographic reconsideration of exoticist representations are perhaps the most insightful moments in Zhang’s analysis. It is at these moments that the book becomes most stimulating, as it demonstrates the ongoing interaction, or the transrelation, between the different vectors that make up its title (Asian, diaspora, western context). Generally, it certainly achieves its main goal, which is, as Zhang at various instances admits, to invite the reader to appreciate the richness of what is otherwise perceived as a marginal poetic corpus.

Evangelos Roumeliotis
University of Edinburgh