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FROM MARGIN TO CENTER: READING AND ANALYZING HYBRID NARRATIVES

Martin, Holly E. (2011) *Writing between Cultures: A Study of Hybrid Narratives in Ethnic Literature of the United States*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Author Holly E. Martin critically explores the multiple literary tools and conventions used to analyze hybrid ethnic literatures. Martin's book critiques the relationship of literature to its interaction with the dominant culture and other ethnic minority cultures. Unfortunately, her approach to this task is detached from the political and social positioning the authors speak from. Thus, her project leaves off a key component of the argument for moving ethnic writing to the center of the literary world. Despite this shortcoming, Martin provides an intervention suitable for undergraduates and those in traditional academic departments looking to move past the binary of margin and center perspectives.

In *Writing between Cultures*, Martin's introduction defines terms such as ethnicity, race, and hybridity, as well as locating the position she takes in her analysis regarding these concepts. Martin locates these terms historically and culturally, emphasizing her personal presentation. She defines hybridity in terms of a *hybrid narrative*: "Many ethnic authors, in order to express their characters' multicultural experiences, have incorporated a hybrid perspective into their works by using narrative strategies that simultaneously present two cultural viewpoints within one narrative space" (2011 p.28). Martin explains that these double, or hybrid narratives, add multiple perspectives to the literature

while simultaneously moving it away from a minority status in the literary canon. This focus relates to the book's incentive: to examine ethnic works of literature within a multicultural context. These explorations open a new forum for discussion in which multiple perspectives of ethnic literature can be analyzed.

Martin emphasizes the types of literatures and cultural productions she examines in each chapter, with the primary focus on Chinese, Mexican, and Native American fiction. She divides the book into five chapters based on styles rather than geographic location. This organizational strategy allows her to present the fiction comparatively. Each chapter focuses on how ethnic authors utilize the literary conventions discussed (magical realism, space of landscape, myth and folklore, humor, and multilingual language), as opposed to isolating the literatures according to their geographic or minority status. Chapter one traces the history of magical realism and its first uses in art and literature. She then follows these trends into the present with contemporary ethnic literary examples. Chapter two uses spaces of landscapes as a critical lens for understanding the subjectivity of fictional characters in select novels. Chapter three explores ethnic group identities as a multiple-subject model for exploring individual identities. Specifically, it argues that mythical and legendary figures provide an alternative

subjectivity for fictional characters. In these spaces, they can imagine other points of view outside their limited or limiting positionalities. Thus, they can assess their situations and multicultural environments through a different lens. Next, chapter four analyzes the use of humor in ethnic literature as a way to undermine hierarchies. Finally, chapter five ends with a focus on multilingual languages and the general use of language by authors, such as the decision to include translations or use italics. Martin concludes with a reaffirmation that hybrid narratives move ethnic literatures away from the margins of U.S. American literature. She stresses that more work needs to be conducted on the subject of these authors and literary techniques, to bring a deeper appreciation of the value of ethnic literatures in the literary culture of the United States.

Holly E. Martin's approach to hybridity and literature is, unfortunately, devoid of political and personal engagement. She analyzes the works of fiction as if they were written in a vacuum of space, not influenced by the personal experiences of the authors. This perspective on hybridity counters many other theoretical approaches defined by postcolonial, postmodern, poststructuralist, and feminist theorists. For example, Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, explains that historians must "get away from defining subaltern consciousness as binary, as having a positive or negative dimension..." (2006 p.277). Instead, he stresses that the role of hybridity is to provide a political space of agency for the subaltern: "This is the historical movement of hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time-lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement" (2006 p.277). The "third space" that Martin alludes to in *Writing between Cultures* lacks any political and personal context and, thus, cannot provide the same spaces for contesting antagonistic posi-

tionalties that Bhabha stresses as the strength of subaltern hybridity. In fact, another theorist, Stuart Hall, argues that hybridity is part of the very makeup of American culture, and thus, it cannot be devoid or separated from one's experiences. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall explains that "the 'New World' presence - America, Terra Incognita - is therefore itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference...the diaspora experience...is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (1990 p.235). This analysis asserts that America's very foundation was a result of hybridity, diverse groups coming together because of their differences. Thus, to suggest that only ethnic authors and literatures can utilize hybrid narratives is problematic of the very notion and development of hybridity. Though Martin wants to pull ethnic authors into the American literary canon through the use of hybridity, her attempts rely on an essentialist argument.

Furthering this engagement on hybridity, Emma Pérez analyzes an immigrant or "outsider" perspective from that of a diasporic subjectivity. There is a significant difference from assimilation versus differences existing in their own context: "Immigrants are expected to become part of the dominant culture; they are urged to adopt its habits and forget their own—to erase. Diasporas, on the other hand, intervene, construct newness, and 'live inside with a difference'" (1999 p.78). Pérez' argument counters the claims that Martin asserts with her literary analyses—that ethnic literatures should be included in the U.S. canon because they conform to literary writing standards. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging the techniques that make writing complex and interesting to read, but it is especially important to ac-

knowledge the content of an ethnic author's work since their political, social, and cultural experiences influence the content of their artwork. All the ethnic literatures Martin analyzes in *Writing between Cultures* offer a different perspective about life that is unique to ethnic experiences. This element should be celebrated as well as the literary prowess, offering even more reasons for inclusion in the American canon.

This book follows a typical English and literary analysis/approach, structured by the hegemony of the British canon. Unfortunately, this encourages the binary of center/margin analyses, with contemporary and ethnic writings being compared to the classics. Holly E. Martin presents ideas and then provides examples with excerpts from literary and cultural texts. She builds upon works by others and is not necessarily creating a new theoretical point of reference. To some degree, it is similar to a literary theory anthology, like those edited by Terry Eagleton (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*), Julie Rivkin (*Literary Theory: An Anthology, Blackwell Anthologies*), and Michael Ryan (*Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction*). A significant difference is that Martin conducts all the analyses and close readings of the works of fictions she included. She references others' analyses, but the primary focus is her interpretation of the ethnic literatures in relation to the dominant, hegemonic U.S. fiction. She engages the writing styles of the ethnic literatures rather than the topic itself, which is race, because her audience is more concerned with literary techniques than the topic of the materials.

Chapter one lays out the history of magical realism and traces it further than the usually attributed Latin American origins. Martin argues that it started earlier than with Franz Roh, a German art critic in 1925, and that it actually originated in Austria in 1909. From there, she presents some preliminary analyses of cultural archives that exemplify the qualities of magical re-

alism, specifically Columbus' writings, Kafka, and debates between theorists about what constitutes magical realism, such as between Borges and Leal. She progresses to traditional Latin American magical realists, such as Gabriel García Márquez, and although she references non-Latin or Chicana/o writers, such as Kingston and Silko, her predominant emphasis in this chapter are Central and Latin American authors. Martin introduces postmodernism and talks about it in relation to magical realism, an especially exciting part of this chapter. Unfortunately, this section is short and not flushed out enough to provide real merit or new insights. Her brief coverage of these connections, mentioning Wendy Faris and Theo L. D'Haen, encourage academics to further research the theoretical relationships. Since Martin's analysis focuses on hybridity, I wondered how this section corresponded to her overall project, which was never made clear. In the end, this chapter was more an argument of what can be viewed as magical realism in various cultural productions and why, by following Wendy Faris' five characteristics of magical realism. Because the predominant emphasis of the chapter is on what types of ethnic literatures employ magical realism as a writing technique, the significance of magical realism as a political and personal project in the literatures was lost. Specifically, I did not see how her examples depicted that "the border between the margin and the center disappear[ed]" and a disruption of hegemonic hierarchies occurred (2011 p.667). She would need to focus on how magical realism provides a hybrid space for dialog in relation to the agency of the author's voice as expressed through the creative texts.

Chapter two engages with a brief history of how land, both physical and symbolic, can be understood as spaces where cultural conflicts have occurred between groups of people. Specifically, she exam-

ines Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* in relation to the history of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Since I am familiar with this historical reference point and Anzaldúa's writings, I appreciated this introduction to the chapter's argument—authors symbolically use landscapes or other physical sites to represent the struggle between minority cultures to maintain their culture within a hegemonic normalized American culture. The examination of land also hearkens back to colonization, which essentially created the hybrid identity and subjectivity people of color negotiate with on a daily basis. The specific examples analyzed in this chapter are both by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* and "Yellow Woman." The analyses of these pieces are very strong, and they do emphasize the strengths that being located in a hybrid land affords the main characters of each piece. Still, the majority of Martin's analysis for *Ceremony* consists of other literary critics' discussions about the book rather than her own. Perhaps it is more a matter of her voice getting swallowed up by the references she uses to support her arguments. However, Martin's analysis is strongest in "Yellow Woman." Other literary examples used in this chapter include *House Made of Dawn*, *Bless Me, Ultima*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. This chapter provided concrete examples of how fictional characters move "beyond the fear of dichotomy to understanding, and ultimately toward integrating the disparate parts of his or her own identity, forming a hybrid identity" (2011 p.1218). This hybrid identity is stronger than a single or dual identity because it gives the characters the flexibility to move between spaces, both physical and imagined, and regain their cultural heritage despite the pressures of conforming to a dominant norm. My only critique with this chapter is that she includes a disclaimer in her conclusion about her analyses concerning hybrid identity. These insights

about hybrid identity are only specific to fictional characters, and they do not represent nor relate to any individual's lived experiences, author or otherwise. I found this disclaimer odd and disruptive to the flow of the chapter. Martin misinterprets Anzaldúa's thoughts and writings, which stress the relationships between an individual and collective experiences as it relates to one's creative writings.

Chapter three further explores the fictional characters' identities as they relate to mythical and legendary figures. The intersections between group and individual identities illuminate the complicated nature of identity formation. The section "Multiple Subjectivity" references Jane Flax and the conflicts associated with multiple subjectivities, a similar idea to the one I explored in my Master's thesis "Multiple Consciousness and Chicana Falsa: Ripping Heads Off Mexican-American Barbie Dolls." In my thesis, I argue that the binary of a true versus fake Chicana cannot be maintained in lieu of a complex multiple consciousness. Engaging in one's multiple consciousnesses allows an individual to connect with a collective community consciousness where agency and social justice flourishes. Martin does not explore the connection between identity and subjectivity in as much depth. Earlier in the chapter, she references L. Ling-chi Wang's five categories of group identity and then provides specific individual references presented in literary works. In the end, she bridges these concepts in relation to mythical characters in literatures, such as Anzaldúa and Coatlicue, Richard Rodriguez and the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Kingston and Fa Mu Lan, to name just a few examples. There is a special section in this chapter dedicated to the use of "tricksters" in literature. This particular analysis is reminiscent of Aída Hurtado's book *The Color of Privilege* and her analysis of the Trickster Treaty. Martin is attentive in her examination of other cultures and does

stress that understanding some of the cultural practices will not be the same for an outsider as it would for an insider of said culture, as specifically emphasized in her Trickster section.

Chapter four focuses on comedy and tragedy as double spaces of ethnic humor. Humor is used as a tool by the fictional characters to undermine the Anglo norm that ethnic minorities are expected to assimilate into. Humor provides a space for overthrowing the status quo because it often places the underdog on top. Martin's goal is to explore how "the irony within ethnic humor, like humor in general, juxtaposes incongruous elements sharing the same space, and points out contradictions" (2011 p.1798). The act of juxtaposing shifts power as it relates to minorities and their often demonized and infantilized cultures. She opens the chapter with a variety of jokes and analyses about humor in general before she moves to specific literary references. She spends a great deal of time on Coyote Stories, and I especially liked the references to how anthropologists are often the bunts of the jokes (which made me recall Paredes and his response to Madsen's anthropological study of *The Mexican-Americans of the Southwest*). Martin also explores how comedy is used as a way to mitigate sadness and tragedy, explored through such writers as Silko and Alexie. She also has a specific section dedicated to humor in Chicana/o literature. This chapter, in particular, seemed to segregate the ethnic authors rather than engage in a discussion between all the examples as she had done with her previous chapters. However, this might have been a particular writing choice because the humorous tactics used in the ethnic literatures differed from each other. Perhaps Martin wanted to emphasize how each segment used humor for different end goals/reasons. Still, the chapter did not follow the structure of the earlier chapters, and I was off-put by that fact. Also, the use of humor seemed limit-

ed to a dual space rather than a hybrid space, even though she argued for the hybrid space in the conclusion of this chapter.

Chapter five, "Multilingual Expression: Hybrid Perspectives through Language," explores how language is used as a tool to express hybrid and multiple identities as they relate to the fictional characters. Bakhtin (heterglossia) and Anzaldúa (code switching) are the primary theorists analyzed for this chapter. She explores a variety of literary and language examples, such as pieces written in languages other than English. She interrogates the reasons behind such a decision, reconnecting with a heritage culture, and then relates back to specific literary examples, Sang ching yu tau hong (Mulberry and Peach). She follows this strategy in regards to the different language varieties fiction can be written in, all one language or hybrid and multilingual. Martin refers to the multilingual texts as literature that code-switches. She briefly examines the use of italics when code-switching, but she does not develop the author's choice of using italics and what that means as it relates to other devices, such as brackets and translations. Some of these aspects are briefly explored, but I wanted even more analysis. The point at which she talks about Signifying (or Signifyin') was mid-way through the chapter, and I was disappointed to see that this section was addressed so late. I wanted more information about linguists and language production, and I was surprised that she did not reference theorists and their work on signs, signifiers, and signified, especially as it relates to signifying'. One aspect I did appreciate was her discussions about metalanguage and silences in literatures as additional spaces for characters to communicate through, albeit non-traditionally. Silence is a theme I have read in a lot of Chicana literature; thus, I found her analysis in the section on silence especially illuminating.

Overall, I found this book to be very extensive in its scope and understanding of literatures and theories. It is officially cataloged under topics such as American literature, minority authors, history and criticism, narration (rhetoric), and ethnicity in literature. It provided a multitude of literary ethnic examples from various authors, although Martin does repeat and reuse the same examples. I did not see this as a flaw, though, because once she had established a reference point for the reader, it was easy to allude back to these pieces. She did not need to supply the additional summary of what the story was about.

Holly Martin's traditional approach when analyzing the texts, which include the literary, artwork, and theory examples used in the book, limits the scope of this book. This was a major weakness of *Writing between Cultures* because it restricts its use within other interdisciplinary departments, such as Chicana and Chicano Studies or Black Studies. Martin's academic grounding in one discipline, such as English, made it easier for her to misread certain theorists was unfamiliar with, such as Gloria Anzaldúa. I also did not understand her distinctions between fictional characters and real people since many of the literatures she references are autobiographical in nature. In fact, I would go so far as to state that it is a common trait that authors of color typically employ in their writings. The self is personal and politically relevant. Finally, I felt that the scope of the book was too large and less of a comparative project, which Martin claimed was her intent with using a variety of ethnic literatures. Her analysis of the fiction was cursory because she had too many examples. Some were more flushed out and developed than others, and there were sections where she still segregated the literatures in terms of the authors' ethnic backgrounds.

In the end, *Writing between Cultures* offers an introduction for those that are unfamiliar with ethnic authors and might

serve as a transitional book for anyone thinking about exploring ethnic studies. The primary audiences are those who do not understand the significance of ethnic literatures at all and still need to be convinced that there is merit in this type of writing. Martin argues that these types of writings can and should be included in the American literary canon because they utilize such complex literary techniques as magical realism, space of landscape, myth and folklore, humor, and multilingual language. Regrettably, she fails to analyze how these ethnic literatures became meaningful in a social and political context, which is through a focus on race, identity, and subjectivity. Overall, the book would have been more compelling if she had taken a theoretical and content-based approach—the book should be included in the literary canon because of the materials expressed and how effectively they are communicated. I would catalog this text as a good resource for undergraduates, especially in an English department. Hybridity is a foundation for ethnic consciousness and that is why academics well-versed in this area (Latina/o, Black, and Chicana/o Studies) might not find Martin's work useful.

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