



THREE ASIAN-HISPANIC WRITERS FROM PERU

DORIS MOROMISATO, JOSÉ WATANABE, SIU KAM WEN

DEBBIE LEE-DISTEFANO

I 778.065
E20111

181
+2

华人中心

THREE ASIAN-HISPANIC WRITERS FROM PERU

Doris Moromisato, José Watanabe, Siu Kam Wen

Debbie Lee-DiStefano

With a Foreword by
Marvin Lewis



The Edwin Mellen Press
Lewiston•Queenston•Lampeter

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lee-DiStefano, Debbie.

Three Asian-Hispanic writers from Peru : Doris Moromisato, Jose Watanabe, Siu Kam Wen / Debbie Lee-DiStefano ; with a foreword by Marvin Lewis.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7734-4933-6

ISBN-10: 0-7734-4933-7

1. Moromisato, Doris, 1962---Criticism and interpretation. 2. Watanabe, Josi, 1946---Criticism and interpretation. 3. Siu, Kam Wen, 1951---Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PQ8498.23.O76Z65 2008

860.9'895085--dc22

2008041766

hors série.

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Front cover: Photo of Chinatown in Lima, Peru

Copyright © 2008 Debbie Lee-DiStefano

All rights reserved. For information contact

The Edwin Mellen Press
Box 450
Lewiston, New York
USA 14092-0450

The Edwin Mellen Press
Box 67
Queenston, Ontario
CANADA L0S 1L0

The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd.
Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales
UNITED KINGDOM SA48 8LT

Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

This study examines the writings of three Peruvian writers of diverse Asian backgrounds. They are: Doris Moromisato (Okinawan), José Watanabe (Japanese), and Siu Kam Wen (Chinese). These writers have in common the recognition of the role of their ethnicity in their interpretations of Peruvian reality within a transnational context.

Dr. Lee-DiStefano applies the post-colonial theoretical paradigm to this body of literature that allows her to explore issues such as transculturation, sexual identity, code switching/borrowing, place/displacement, and other aspects of self-definition within an alien and often hostile society. These authors offer penetrating insights from insiders into what it means to be the Asian "Other" in the Peruvian and broader American contexts.

Dr. Lee-DiStefano incorporates interviews into this study in order to enhance the reader's understanding of diasporic cultures and their experiences with national majorities. In the process the writers' similarities and differences are delineated. While all three writers at one point or another interrogate what it means to be Peruvian, their approaches differ. Moromisato focuses upon issues of gender and marginality. Watanabe addresses canon information and inequality, while Siu explores the private lives of the *barrio chino* in Lima.

Although a great deal of critical attention has been devoted to literary interpretations of the African diaspora in the Americas, Asians are the subjects of

a minimal amount of investigations. This collection is an original scholarly contribution that is presented with sophistication and passion. It is the best available on this topic to date.

Marvin A. Lewis

Professor Emeritus

University of Missouri-Columbia

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign, Seton Hill University and Southeast Missouri State University for the research grants that afforded me the time and funds to research this topic both in and outside the United States. I would also like to thank the authors, particularly Doris Moromisato and Siu Kam Wen, for their support of my work and willingness to share their insight with me. Lastly, I thank my family, Charles and Baillie, and my friends in Lima, Fernando, Mery and Mavi, who assisted me in each trip I have made to Lima to do research.

Table of Contents

Foreword by Marvin Lewis	iii
Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Chapter One	17
Doris Moromisato	
Chapter Two	53
José Watanabe	
Chapter Three	89
Siu Kam Wen	
Chapter Four	119
Interviews with Doris Moromisato and Siu Kam Wen	
Works Cited	133
Index	137

Introduction

The concept of an Asian Latin American identity is an elusive creature in Latin American literary and cultural studies. The orientalist approach to the ethnic classification of Latin Americans of Asian ancestry, i.e. Japanese-Peruvians or Chinese-Cubans, as not representative of Latin America still permeates Latin Americanist discourse. When history books talk of the composite of Latin American ethnicity, the trinity of Indian, European and African still stands as the marker. However, the ethnic and cultural mixture of hundreds of thousands of Asian immigrants, meaning Far, Southeast, South, Middle and Near East, over the past two centuries adds new branches to the model. The contributions that Latin Americans of Asian descent have made are not miniscule. They are simply often excluded when placed alongside the histories of the dominant culture or those of minority groups that, while still suffering marginal status, have a certain level of legitimacy.

The field of literature, in both the United States and Latin America, is no exception. As Ma Sheng-Mei states in her work *Immigrant Subjectivities* regarding literary studies, "[...] the emphasis has been largely on Francophone and Anglophone literatures of Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, and the Indian sub-continent with scant scrutiny of the Pacific Rim or its continuum in immigrant enclaves in the West" (1). Coincidentally, although few works attempt to treat the many facets of Asian-Latin Americanness, two anthologies do serve as justification to the feasibility of the study of Asian-Latin American literary and cultural impacts: *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas* by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns and *Asians in Latin America* by Jane Cho. Moreover, researchers such as Jeffrey Lesser, Clara Chu, and Russell Leong, to name a few, have striven to achieve an integration of the experiences and cultural production of Asians south of the border into codified fields of academic study in the United States.

The research accumulated by scholars such as these explains that the Asian immigrants to Latin America and their experiences often replicate the transnational experience of other diasporic groups. The issues of language, culture, place, and Otherness resound just as strongly in the Asian-Latin American experience as they do in those of the Asian American, African American or Indigenous groups.

The purpose of this collection is to continue the discussion of the Asian-Latin American as an Academic notion, more specifically, the difficulty in legitimizing the claim that Asian-Latin Americans and their accomplishments merit inclusion into the definitions of national identity in their respective nations of origin and/or residency. More importantly, they justifiably pertain to and thus represent Latin America as much as any other group. The focus in this particular study is on literature as a cultural product and being so, explores what Asian-Hispanic writers write about. To help narrow the scope, the writers included in this collection are *limeña* writers. The term *limeña* is used because, although none was born in Lima, they all began their writing careers while living there; this offers a cohesive, unifying factor. They are a diverse lot: Doris Moromisato is a feminist poet whose parents were both of Okinawan descent; José Watanabe is a *mestizo* (Japanese father and criollo mother) who achieved national recognition as a Peruvian poet; Siu Kam Wen is a prose writer who immigrated to Peru from China and now resides in Hawaii. Thematically, they are not comparable: Moromisato interrogates society and the marginalization that all minorities suffer; Watanabe's poetry is much more traditional, although it also points to inequities in society; while Siu Kam Wen's prose is diverse, his collection included in this study focuses on the *barrio chino* in Lima. Regardless of their many differences, they all depict to some degree the dilemma of the Peruvian of Asian descent. The reader receives a different perspective of what being Asian-Peruvian means for each writer via their literary discourse, from which a greater understanding of the Asian-Hispanic situation can be extracted. As a way of helping the uninitiated

reader to whom these authors are probably unknown, interviews with Doris Moromisato and Siu Kam Wen are included. José Watanabe passed away as this manuscript was coming to life and therefore could not be interviewed for this study. However, I was able to interview him in 2000 and therefore have discussed with him my approach to his poetry.

It should be noted from the onset that this study does not recount to any great length the histories of the many Asiatic groups that have made Latin America their home, nor does it expound on the histories of the Chinese and Japanese groups in Lima. This exclusion was a conscious effort to avoid objectifying the groups as well as the authors that are included. Too often it is easy to avoid a serious discussion of what Asian-Hispanics experience because researchers focus only on the past. This aversion to incorporating the present, in the opinion of this author, is another means of marginalizing the people whose works are being discussed. There are numerous excellent studies that the reader can access to discover more about the histories of the Asiatic presence in Latin America. Academics such as Jeffrey Lesser, Clara Chu, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Eugenio Chang Rodriguez, Karen Tei Yamashita, Russell Leong and countless others have written extensively on the histories of the turbulent relationships between Latin Americans of Asian descent and other Latin Americans. However, this study will only engage the histories as they are necessary to approach the literary works that it interrogates.

Before beginning to analyze the writers' works, it is necessary to understand the framework used in the analyses. The academic approach to the concept of Asian-Latin Americaness has expanded throughout the last decade as the limits of long-established categories of identity have come under question. Globalization and the Post-modern fragmentation of social structures have brought to light the erroneous vision of homogenous groups whose borders were at one time unsurpassable. For example, the fields of Afro-Romance Studies and Pacific Rim Studies defy the superiority of traditional positions of where Blacks or Asians

legitimately belong. Essentially, the recognition of the heterogeneity of a nation's ethnic composite obliges Academia to question the definition upon which national identities are defined and established. Such is the situation in regards to Asian-Latin Americans. The exclusion of non-U.S. Asian populations in Asian American Studies and the same exclusion of Asian populations in Latin American Studies prompted the current research that delves into these forgotten groups.

Lane Ryo Hirabayashi addresses this polemic in "Reconsidering Transculturation and Power", stating that the two main questions that complicate the issue are "Does the study of Asians in the Americas fall readily within the domain of traditional Latin American/Area studies? Or should Asians in the Americas be studied as an integral part of Asian American Studies" (*Amerasia* xi)? This researcher would argue that the answer to both questions is an emphatic "Yes." By definition the very term Asian-Latin American implies an explicit relationship to both fields of study. Asian diaspora studies would find interest in the successes of and obstacles encountered by Asians who live in or once resided in a Latin American country. Secondly, the cultural ties that connect them require an approximation that takes into account this identification with Latin America; while their heredity may be different from the traditionally recognized ethnic groups, their self-realization of being Latin American precludes all other concepts of what Latin American Studies determines to be authentic. Lastly, the very term "American" denotes a questionable realm of signification, having been usurped by the United States while realistically applicable to all of the Americas. One could also contend that the need to go beyond mere historical circumstances and concentrate on the integrative elements (philosophy, art, social institutions) of Latin Americans of Asian descent in their respective countries is still prominent, which in essence is the goal of this study.

To be sure, the field of Asian-Latin American Studies is traversing the same path as did African American, Asian American and Afro-Hispanic Studies. The history of academic exclusion in the United States of minority literature, as it was

once called, also extends to Latin America, due partially to the fact that academic discourse in the Americas has often stemmed from the research and foci of U.S. academics. Over the past ten years, various scholars have attempted to initiate closer inspection of the Asian-Latin American situation. In the 1999-2000 academic year Stanford University and the Center for Latin American Studies sponsored courses that promoted the study of Asian immigration to Latin America and the cultural impacts that this immigration has had on both the immigrants and the various Latin American countries that received them, a significant step towards codifying the field as a legitimate academic and humanistic topic. Moreover, in 1999 the ISSCO (International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas), in conjunction with the University of Havana and the Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino, held a conference that also consisted of papers that specifically reflected on the status of Chinese abroad, largely pertaining to the Latin American situation. In May 2006, a two week symposium on the Asian Latin American experience was hosted by the Americas Society at Hunter College. Speakers such as Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Eugenio Chang-Rodriguez, Siu Kam Wen and María Kodama presented varying aspects of Asians in Latin America. These groups and events all support the necessity for the inclusion of this topic in the academic arena.

Recently, various Latin American countries have initiated their own versions of an ethnic Renaissance by encouraging the promotion of their ethnic minority groups. In reference to Asian groups in both Cuba and Peru, organizations have been established to encourage inquiry into their histories and impact on society. In Cuba, the Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino was inaugurated in 1996 and holds annual conferences in which plenary speakers explore issues that affect Chinese Cubans. In Peru, the relationship established with Japan under Alberto Fujimori's presidency prompted the construction of the Japan Culture Center. Like the Grupo Promotor, the aims of the Center are to explore the history of Japanese-

Peruvians and encourage a reconnection to the language and culture that were prohibited during World War II.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the lack of examination regarding how these citizens engage their own positions within their countries is still prevalent. Bearing all this in mind this study attempts to steer clear of relegating the Asian-Latin American to a fixed position; the ideal goal is to explore the many Asian-Latin American voices and delve into what those voices say, cognizant of their individual situations while at the same time expressing a viewpoint that reflects aspects of what could be said to be the Asian-Latin American experience. To assist with this, the following is a brief theoretical explanation of the basis of the approach taken when the works these writers have produced are analyzed. The reader will witness that this study turns to Post-colonial theory to explore the concept of marginalization and the critical approaches produced by Asian American critics as a mean of demonstrating how Asian Americans have tackled this issue.

Theoretical Approach

Dr. Evelyn Hu DeHart wrote the following regarding how the introduction of Chinese 'coolies' to Cuba affected the society. She writes that the Chinese presence:

helped dismantle the slave ideology that upheld Cuban society in the 19th century and created a new social and economic order based on ethnic minorities. The slave ideology was erected on the basis of the separation and the hierarchical ordering of the two races, white and black, master and slave. This racist ideology could not be maintained, however, in the face of the Chinese [...] [they] occupied an intermediary position with the possibility of being free when their contracts expired. (12)

It is a quote with which one can take issue because it doesn't fully express the position of the Chinese 'coolies' after their introduction into the Cuban plantation

system. Her attempts to positively signify the Chinese presence in Cuba disguise the historical and legal situation of the 'coolie.' Dr. Hu DeHart's statements simply reflect an examination of the symptom rather than the disease.

While it is true that the Chinese brought a relatively unfamiliar ethnic element to the island, it did not alter the system of treatment of the Other, meaning that which was not of European origin. The Conquest demonstrated that the Other, which in that case was the indigenous groups, was to be treated as a hostile, something to be destroyed or assimilated. Nothing less than absolute subjugation would be acceptable. After the Conquest, slavery perpetuated this ideal; it was merely directed towards another ethnic group: the Africans. With the undoing of the legality of the slave trade, a new group was imported to take the place of the previous two. The Chinese were categorized similarly to the slaves by employing a different, yet corresponding signifier. They were *contract laborers*, a term which established a separate legal category that appeared different from slavery on the surface. However, the ideological system behind the categorization rearranged itself to accommodate them, thus allotting them to the position of enslaved Other as were the Indians and Africans.

A statement such as the one above demonstrates the necessity to engage academically the presence of the Asian Diaspora in Spanish America. Asians, specifically Far East Asians in the case of the study that follows, fit the category of Other as do all other groups who did not (or do not) represent what ideologically constitutes a member of the dominant culture. The only real difference that separates the Asians from the Africans and Indigenous groups is chronological time. Having only 150 years of consistent migration, institutions of knowledge still balk at the idea that Asians can pertain to the Western hemisphere as valid citizens rather than immigrants. Their role in Western history, with the exception of World War II and the construction of railroads, is oftentimes excluded.

The exclusion and the position of Other that the Asian Hispanic experiences is the basic premise for this study. The point of departure and methodological approach stem from the idea that the Asian is a post-colonial subject. Post-colonial theory appropriately depicts the position that ethnic minorities hold in post-colonial societies. *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* goes to great lengths to define what “post-colonial” means. Post-colonial theory “addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact” (2). It also involves many types of contact through which colonization is enacted: “migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of Imperial Europe” (2). The term is used “to represent the continuing process of imperial suppressions and exchanges throughout the diverse range of societies, in their institutions and their discursive practices” (3).

Essentially, the Asians that immigrated to Latin America are post-colonial subjects based on the premise that their presence in the Americas perpetuated the colonizing/naming process that had begun centuries before. The immigration of Asians to the Americas, whether by choice or by force, was a cultural shock to the inhabitants; they were ‘orientals’ whose ways were exotic. They threatened the framework of understanding that the West had developed. Edward Said in his landmark text *Orientalism* defines the term orientalism and what constitutes an orientalized figure. Said explains that the oriental is a Western construct, a term created through its binary opposition to the Occident, or West. He writes that orientalism in theory is “[...] a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2), but in practice it is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). While it is true that Said is referring to his own position as Palestinian, he also manages to construct a cultural theory that expands by analogy to the treatment and representation of all Others by Western knowledge. The very term ‘Asian’ that this study employs demonstrates the

complexities that arise when one broaches the subject: Asia, as a continent, is an amalgam of peoples and practices. By Western standards, however, it has remained a totality with no sub-stratum.

A brief discussion of what this study refers to as Other, the theory behind the concept and its implications in society, bears explaining. The Other was defined previously as that which is not European. The *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, which serves as the source from which the following definitions are taken, describes more specifically that in reference to the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized, which is at the heart of post-colonial theory, the colonized subject is the 'Other'. It was a relationship established by the colonizing society as a means to assert "the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view (169). The binary opposition of center/margin also symbolizes this antagonistic relationship. The notion dictates that there is a self-proclaimed center (the colonizer/Europe) that defines all that is opposite and non-representative of itself as margin (colonies/not-Europe). Such a subservient status places the 'other/Other' at "the periphery of power, culture and civilization" (37).

The Other, therefore, holds a non-participatory station within his/her own society. The institutions that dictate and define what the national culture is are uninclusive. National culture refers to the framework within a society that validates inhabitants of that nation as members of that society. Such a definition draws upon Benedict Anderson's notion that one's sense of national belonging is tied to one's access to the cultural systems within which the political systems are created. It is an imagined set of practices and beliefs in regards to place that make up national culture. However, the governing cultural body is homogenous and archaic in the sense that it is not open to expansion. This is primarily due to the fact that those who dictate what constitutes this imaginary system need to control it. This is done by contracts and exclusion. Louis Althusser acknowledges this system by naming it the "Ideological State Apparatus." The forces behind this apparatus are those that define what constitutes official national culture.

Henceforth, the official culture is the model against which all elements of society will be gauged and their validity ascertained and decided.

It is the exclusionary nature of national culture that concerns this study. It insinuates that there is a perfect totality with no room for improvement. Homi Bhabha calls it a continuation of the modernist project. He writes:

The marginal or minority is not the space of a celebratory or utopian Self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity- progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past- that rationalize the authoritarian, normalizing tendencies within cultures in the name of national interest or the ethnic prerogative.

(*Nation and Narration* 4)

The eradication of cultural practices that do not represent the dominant culture is the tool that the colonizer uses in an attempt to destroy all remnants of difference. Cultural practices can include, but are not limited to, the use of language, the affirmation of identity, and the signs and symbols that refer to ethnic culture. The colonized must assimilate if he is to ever gain access to the political, economic, and social circles that are dominated by the colonizer. Albert Memmi writes, "The colonized almost never experiences nationality and citizenship. Nationally and civically he is only what the colonizer is not" (96). Moreover, Memmi states that the colonized "is in no way a subject of history anymore. He carries its burden, [...] always as an object" (92). Partha Chatterjee corroborates this notion of isolationism that the colonized experiences from the national culture. She expresses that no matter to what extent popular culture attempts to become a part of the national culture, the state will fight to eradicate any hint of difference for it is difference and the fear of that which is different among its dominions that give it power (26).

While this reflects the approach taken when presenting the three authors' works in the subsequent chapters, a brief examination of academic studies