

Book Reviews

Rey Chow. *Ethics After Idealism: Theory—Culture—Ethnicity—Reading*.
Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998. Pp. xxiii, 235. \$29.95, \$14.95 pb.

Rey Chow is among the most compelling cultural critics writing in English. Her previous books, including *Woman and Chinese Modernity* (1991) and *Writing Diaspora* (1993), take on large issues with bold and often unpredictable argumentative turns that consistently challenge received truisms about theory, ethnicity, and the nature of postcolonial resistance. *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, for instance, sets out to criticize “both the hegemonic status of Western theoretical thinking and the entrenched ways of interpretation in the field of Chinese literature” (xii), while *Writing Diaspora* challenges the way scholars in the West participate in “a circuit of productivity that draws its capital from others’ deprivation while refusing to acknowledge its own presence as endowed” (14). The polemical tone that characterizes Chow’s arguments makes her work provocative if not controversial: readers of *ARIEL* may recall Chow’s article “The Fascist Longings in Our Midst” (1995), where she connects multicultural imperatives to the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s: “In the white liberal enthusiasm for ‘people of colour’ that is currently sweeping through North American academic circles, something of the fascism we witnessed in earlier decades has made its return in a new guise. The basis for this fascism is, once again, the identification with an idealized other placed in the position of unquestionable authority” (41).

Such concerns are at the center of Chow’s latest book, *Ethics After Idealism* (1998), which reprints “The Fascist Longings in Our Midst” along with nine other articles that were previously published between 1992 and 1997. In these chapters and the first-rate Introduction, Chow addresses the politics of otherness, or more precisely, what she calls the *idealizing of otherness*. Her search for an “ethics after idealism” attempts to formulate a mode of criticism that doggedly follows the traces of “idealism” that she argues characterize contemporary cultural studies, not in order to make a complete break with such traces but rather to question their institutional and social implications.

Chow's search takes her through institutional politics of theory and cultural studies in the US academy; the work of key thinkers including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Slavoj Žižek, and Frantz Fanon; film versions of Asian American works such as *M. Butterfly*, and *The Joy Luck Club* (the latter compared with the film *Jurassic Park*); the significance of "endurance" in Zhang Yimou's film *To Live*; and the particular and often ignored postcolonial status of Hong Kong, Rey Chow's place of birth.

Such a synopsis of the book may hint at the range of materials Chow draws upon to make her arguments, but it cannot convey the fine argumentative turns through which she takes us through such terrain. The best examples of such turns occur in the Introduction and Chapter One, where Chow begins with the question why are the most strident critics of "cultural studies" the very same scholars who advocated poststructuralist "theory" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her response is as follows:

Cultural studies, by its dogged turns toward the other not only within language and text but also outside language and text, in effect forces poststructuralist theory to confront the significance of race—and with it the histories of racial discrimination and racial exploitation—that is repressed in poststructuralist theory's claim to subversiveness and radicalism. By doing so, *cultural studies challenges poststructuralist theory's own position as the "other" of Europe, as the "other" within the European tradition.* (5)

Chow is not content, however, at stopping with such a remarkable point. She moves from this critique of poststructuralist theory to an equally incisive critique of scholars working in "area studies," who use "culture" and appeals to "specificity" to ignore the implications of "theory." As Chow writes, "at academic conferences and research gatherings as well as in print, very conservative practitioners of area studies can now safely endow their own retrograde positions with the glorious *multiculturalist* aura of defending non-Western traditions" (10). The breadth and rigour of Chow's argument here make her work indispensable reading for anyone concerned with the academic politics of "otherness" in the 1990s.

Perhaps no part of Chow's book is more significant than Chapter Two, the reprinted version of "The Fascist Longings in Our Midst." The chapter begins with an extended discussion of what Chow calls fascism's "technologized idealism" (14) in relation to various notions of "projection." The big turn in Chow's argument, however, occurs when she connects her discussion of fascism with a fictional scenario, which Chow calls "The Story of O, or, the New Fascism." Chow's scenario features a "person of color" from a "third world" country faking her way through graduate school in the US, and, by narrating such a story, Chow attempts to "deconstruct our increasingly fascistic intellectual environment, in which facile attitudes, pretentious credentials, and irresponsible work habits can be fostered in the name of 'cultural pluralism'" (28).

While the shocking nature of Chow's argument is surely intended as a wake-up call, I find myself agreeing with Neil ten Kortenaar when he questions its logical soundness by pointing out that "cultural pluralism, for all its sins, does not kill people" (32). And while Chow's argument is clearly directed at the cultural politics of the US academy, I find myself wondering how it might make sense in Canada, which is where I live and work. Academia in Canada, to the best of my knowledge, is not being overrun by people of colour faking their way through the system. More pertinent, perhaps, is the currency attached to idealizing otherness as *object* of analysis in postcolonial studies in Canada. To take Chow's argument seriously might entail rethinking how idealizing otherness as object of analysis has worked to deflect attention away from questions of access and the distribution of cultural capital in Canadian universities. To put the matter bluntly, I know of far more studies of "Native literature" in Canada than I know of Native people with access to the cultural capital necessary to secure an academic position. So when Chow asks her key question "Does 'otherness' itself automatically suffice as critical intervention?" (30), it befits her readers to consider its broadest implications, for while Chow's argument in its narrow sense is possible to dismiss, in its broad sense it hits very close to home indeed.

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George, Rosemary Marangoly. *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. Pp. ix, 265. \$49.95.

In The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction, Rosemary Marangoly George analyzes the home as a conceptual object, and she uses this analysis to develop a broad and original study of twentieth-century literature. George's central organizing idea is that the "search for the location in which the self is 'at home'" has been "one of the primary projects of twentieth-century fiction in English" (3). Specifically, the home plays a crucial role in the development