

Book Reviews

Robbie B.H. Goh, ed. *Narrating Race: Asia, (Trans)Nationalism, Social Change*. Textxet Studies in Comparative Literature 64. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011. 277 pp. US\$87.

A book of essays that attempts to cover a geographical area as vast and heterogeneous as “Asia” will inevitably have its gaps and omissions. Missing here are, among others, analyses of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Taiwan. However, this omnibus importantly emphasizes inter- and intra-Asian relations and the various sub-nationalisms within the nations examined. It both recognizes and refreshingly moves to address the poly-ethnicity and complex racial dynamics of Asian nations that many, particularly in the West, still see as homogenous and monolithic. As the title of the collection indicates, the essays in *Narrating Race: Asia, (Trans) Nationalism, Social Change* cohere around the signifier “race” as a starting point to explore the various ways in which racial and cultural identities are produced and negotiated in contemporary Asia-Pacific. For example, Lily Rose Tope examines Eurasian indigeneity in Singapore, Caroline S. Hau explores the Chinese diaspora in Filipino film, and Chitra Sankaran investigates the divisive functions of caste in modern India. Robbie B. H. Goh considers the notion of “global tribalism” in the works of Amitav Ghosh, and Wenche Ommundsen looks at the politics of representation in refugee narratives written by white Australian authors. Such essays demonstrate the centrality of race and racial relations to the constitution as well as to the continual transformation of national and transnational formations in South, Southeast, and East Asia.

According to editor Robbie B. H. Goh, the collection seeks to make an initial contribution to “understanding the contours of race construction and contestation in Asia and sites of Asian diasporas” (23). For Goh, literary and cultural productions “call attention to the problems of racial constructions and transformations in Asia, which are otherwise in danger of being ignored amidst the overwhelming demographic and developmental problems afflicting many parts of Asia today” (23). The book thus takes as a guiding premise the notion that art (literature, film, photography, etc.) is important to the process of social change. Yet the volume’s major weakness is the way in which it makes the transition from history, politics, and society to artistic representations.

Many of the essays begin by recounting—at times in detail—the socio-political histories of the regions or nations they discuss, highlighting how forces such as imperialism, trans- and sub-nationalism, and globalization have shaped literary and cultural narratives that address racial/ethnic identities and forms of belonging. Given the introduction's lengthy historical and sociological recapitulation of the racial politics of the Asia-Pacific region, this emphasis on context is not surprising. But in the individual essays, the context necessary for the work of literary interpretation often detracts from the analysis that was supposed to occupy the main scholarly focus. Literature sometimes enters the discussion near the end, leaving only enough space for cursory analysis. At other times, readings of texts as reflections of social context become schematic and reductive. Unfortunately, many of the essays in this collection treat creative works as registers of sociological, material problems and not as active interventions in their social and cultural fields.

That said, some of the essays do engagingly point to the social role of literary and cultural productions. For instance, Judy Celine Ick's exploration of national imaginings through theater in a Filipino context intriguingly reconceptualizes the nation as a spectacle, a performance in "ambiguous and provisional time and space" (221). Examining the iconography of the racialized and exoticized body in photography, Tania Roy details the historical and social possibilities such images enable or disable. Surveying poetry from India, the Philippines, Singapore, and Hong Kong, Agnes S. L. Lam provides a good introduction to how Asian poetry addresses issues of cultural difference and racism. A cosmopolitan poetic vision, she argues, emphasizes "common humanity while maintaining cultural diversity" (271), speaking to poetry's anti-racist functions and responsibilities. Furthermore, through an effort to link the contemporary situation in Asia to legacies of colonial policies, nationalist movements, and global flows, the collection as a whole gains a sense of social and political relevance.

Narrating Race will be useful to those interested in Asian studies, diaspora studies, globalization studies, and race and ethnic studies. It shines a crucial spotlight on the challenges of race and ethnicity facing the Asia region in the twenty-first century. In addition to devoting attention to works by established authors such as Amitav Ghosh, Li-Young Lee, Rex Shelley, R.K. Narayan, Pico Iyer, and Xu Xi, the collection draws our attention to important but less familiar literary and cultural texts being produced in the region like novels by Ayu Utami and Dewi Lestari and plays by Chris Millado and Floy Quintos. For that reason alone it deserves to be read.

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