

WILLIAM BOELHOWER
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Editors

Sites of Ethnicity: Europe and the Americas

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Sites of Ethnicity:

Europe and the Americas

S*ites of Ethnicity* brings together contributions from scholars in Canada, the U.K., Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United States who share an interest in exploring the theoretical possibilities of site analysis and the crucial role of place and spatial tactics in multi-ethnic societies. The strategic means for deciphering total social facts – comprising broad issues such as travel, subject positioning, identity, ethnicity, culture, memory – are as diverse and wide-ranging as the contributors to this volume. Manifestations of ethnicity in literature and non-literary texts, music, food, TV series, photographs, and even gravesites, are revealed to be constructed, performed, eaten, remembered, desired, and imagined as important sites for a definition of both individual and collective identities that, when studied in-depth, prove consistently elusive, fluid, and always already deferred. The papers present a vision of a world that is increasingly a global village, one in which memory and local place help measure various forms of ethnic representation through a reflection of possible sites of cultural engagement and agency.

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Table of Contents

WILLIAM BOELHOWER, ROCÍO G. DAVIS, CARMEN BIRKLE Introduction	ix
WERNER SOLLORS Sites of Ethnicity in Europe and the Americas: From "Rappaccini's Daughter" to Señor Coconut	1
I Traveling Sites	
STEFANO LUCONI From the Village to the United States: Nationalism and Ethnic Identity among Italian Americans	15
TERESA FIORE The Ship as a Pre-occupied Space: A Comparative Approach to Migrant Cultures between Italy and the United States.....	29
FRANCA BERNABEI Atlantic Crossings and (Post)Metropolitan Transitions in Caribbean Diasporic Fiction	45
DOROTHEA LÖBBERMANN "Making Strange" in Tourism: Harlem through European Eyes in the 1920s and 1930s.....	63
II Desiring Space	
GITA RAJAN Situated Identity: Chitra Divakaruni's <i>The Vine of Desire</i> and Meera Syal's <i>Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee</i>	79
HELEN MAY DENNIS Felicitous Spaces: Places of Refuge in the Writings of Paula Gunn Allen, Linda Hogan, and Leslie Marmon Silko.....	95
PIRJO AHOKAS Transcending Binary Divisions: Constructing a Postmodern Female Urban Identity in Louise Erdrich's <i>The Antelope Wife</i> and Zadie Smith's <i>White Teeth</i>	115

III Imagining Identity

- MONIKA MÜLLER
Race and National Identity in Harriet Beecher Stowe's
Uncle Tom's Cabin and *Dred* and George Eliot's
Daniel Deronda..... 131
- MICHAEL SOTO
Transculturation and the Discourse of American Modernism 149
- JACQUELYNNE MODESTE
Slaying Modern Dragons: Blues Ontology, King Arthur,
and Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* 165
- A. LAVONNE BROWN RUOFF
Images of Europe in Leslie Marmon Silko's
Gardens in the Dunes and James Welch's
The Heartsong of Charging Elk..... 179
- IV Performing Ethnicity**
- WILLIAM L. ANDREWS
Bookerese: Performing Blackness in *Up from Slavery* 199
- ALICIA OTANO
"My words will always come out like home": Privileging
Non-Standard English in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's
Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers and
Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*..... 219
- MITA BANERJEE
Asian Bogeywomen and Loveable Italians:
Ethnicity in German Popular Culture 233
- FRANK SALAMONE
Did They Make the Scene or Did the Scene Make Them?
Expatriate Jazz Musicians in Europe 251
- HORST TONN
Rap Music in Germany: How Ethnic Culture Travels..... 271

V Eating Culture

- GLENN DEER
Eating the Eurasian Text: Food, Sex, and the Audience
in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*, Sigrid Nunez's
A Feather on the Breath of God, and Juzo Itami's *Tampopo*..... 287
- SEIWOONG OH
The Kitchen as an Ethnic Space in Timothy Mo's
Sour Sweet and Gish Jen's *Typical American* 303

VI Constructing Memory

- ANGELIKA KÖHLER
Sites of Encounter: Medea and La Llorona 317
- AGNIESZKA BEDINGFIELD
Trans-Memory and Diaspora: Memories of Europe and Asia
in American Immigrant Narratives 333
- CARMEN BIRKLE
Caribbean and Irish (De)Colonizations in Comparison:
Dionne Brand's and Eavan Boland's Recovery of the "Lost Land" 347
- ROSALIA BAENA
The Photograph as Site of Ethnicity: An Analysis
of Transcultural Autobiographies 361
- ANGELA M. LEONARD
Remembering at African Atlantic Slave Gravesites 375
- Contributors and Editors 389

WILLIAM BOELHOWER, ROCÍO G. DAVIS,
CARMEN BIRKLE

Introduction

Reading and writing about sites of ethnicity have much in common with the disciplinary challenges of a "dig" in archaeology. The heuristic and epistemological conundrums are roughly the same. After identifying a site, the first task an archaeologist must face is to determine its dimensions, even before beginning to "discover" it. But in staking it off, he or she is already involving themselves in a decision, one that depends on what they are looking for. In one sense we presume the site is already there, right in front of us. But in another, it is we who are creating it in the very act of roping it off and labeling it. In the first instance we have a form of naive realism, while the second reminds us that sites are semiospheres in which the fieldworker is inevitably implicated in the very definition of what a site is. In other words, the countenance it wears is to a great extent the one we choose to give it.

In giving sites of ethnicity a face, therefore, we can select from a range of strategies. If we decide that sites are essentially found, then perhaps our major interest will be to inventory and classify what we find in them. This is largely descriptive work, and accuracy and comprehensiveness will be the guidelines for evaluating a site's cultural significance. If, however, the site is sketchy and there is very little to go on, then we will have to rely on our own imaginative and interpretive skills in working it. In this case we might very well consider ourselves conjurers as we make a site appear where previously there was none. Sometimes a whole world can be evoked from a single object or trace. In one of his "thoughts" Blaise Pascal brilliantly captures the kind of thin ice we must tread when working sites of ethnicity: "A city, a countryside, from a distance are a city and a countryside; but as we draw near them they become houses, trees, roof-tiles, leaves, grass, ants, the feet of ants, and so on, *ad infinitum*. All of this is contained in the name countryside" (42).

When dealing with sites of ethnicity, we are involved in the same critical issue of scale. Taking our cue from Marcel Mauss's famous method of the total social fact, we can certainly begin with the ideal scenario that everything in front of us speaks and is potentially meaningful. If the world amounts to the totality of facts about it, then a site is surely the totality of signs that speak it for someone who is actively listening. In passing from world to site, we are also passing from an ontocentric to a semiocentric re-

gime. It is on the basis of such knowledge that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggestively invented the narrative method of “thick description” (143-59). But that said, our site-specific project must inevitably be defined by the representational parameters we choose to work with; and these will determine not only the dimensions of the site but, more radically, what kind of site we choose to study. In other words, working a site—whether in terms of finding or conjuring it—entails an ethical decision and points to our own inextricable relation to it. Again, it is a matter of scale. Ever since T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, our reading of sites is burdened by the epiphany “You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!”

In this volume of essays, culled from well over one hundred submissions presented at the international MESEA (Multi-ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas) conference held in Padua, Italy, we learn that sites of ethnicity can be fenced off, extended, imploded, exploded, and, above all, compared. In his masterly inaugural essay Werner Sollors exemplifies an essential aspect of sites that now seems strikingly obvious, but only after someone with his scholarly range has made it so—namely that once we begin to “dig,” we learn quickly enough that all sites are intrinsically plural. And this plurality depends a great deal on the curiosity and competence of the person visiting it. Undoubtedly, a site comes down to a local habitation and a name, but that said, no site is culturally unalloyed. For that matter, how could it be if even its most ostensive surfaces are nothing but a web of departures and arrivals, routes and space-scopes, cultural layerings, and, perhaps most importantly, *koinonai* (forms of human association).

As Sollors and those following him present their work on comparing sites, it becomes overwhelmingly evident that these so-called common places are constitutively dynamic, unstable, allusive, intimately public, personally collective, and unsuppressibly alive. As our various contributors follow their sites’ seemingly endless susurrations, we are gradually introduced to an axiomatic truth: sites are not sites in their pure singularity but only in their relation to other sites. And so we return to Sollors’s explosive reading of the rather staid and even provincial site of Padua and through his *lectio magistralis* learn that the city is intrinsically cosmopolitan in its very being. In addition, the idea of working sites to discover this “natural” perspectivism—for such was the aim of the Padua conference—also betrays, however indirectly, an ethical intention to keep them open (rather than wall them up in some kind of defensive parochialism, whether locally or nationally inspired). By comparing sites, then, these papers present us with a vision of the world that is increasingly a global village, one in which memory and local place actually help us to measure the various forms of complicity that an ocean-spanning agenda has sought to identify.

* * *

The strategic means for deciphering the totality of signs—comprising broad issues such as traveling, space, identity, ethnicity, culture, memory—are as diverse and wide-ranging as the contributors to this volume. Manifestations of ethnicity in such media as literary and non-literary texts, music (jazz, rap), food, TV series, photographs, and even gravesites, are revealed to be constructed, performed, eaten, remembered, desired, and imagined as important sites for a definition of both individual and collective identities that, when studied in-depth, prove consistently elusive, fluid, and always already deferred.

The first section of this volume of essays introduces the theme of **Traveling Sites** as a locus for studying ethnicity. Given the historical dimensions of repeated diasporas, internal migrations within individual countries, and a world economy that depends on the migration of peoples to keep it going, the phenomenon of travel, and the possibility of feeling at home in a highly mobile world, is increasingly routine. In various ways these essays draw attention to the complex weave of roots and routes that perennially determines the relations between cultures and continents. As James Clifford has famously pointed out, “[e]veryone is on the move, as they have been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel” (7). Perhaps more than others, ethnic studies scholars have demonstrated how vital the interplay between localized dwelling and the phenomenon of migration is. Even among many of today’s writers continual, and often forced, movement has become the norm and it surely reflects the larger historical scenario of cultural and material exchange and conflict.

Stefano Luconi’s essay on the little Italies in the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the post-World War II period demonstrates a conflicted process of cultural and political translation in which the regional loyalties, lived in the old country and relocated into the new, lead to a revised idea of allegiance and citizenship. Teresa Fiore provides us with a reading of the ship as a complex *topos* that unites and crosses other spaces and serves as a highly evocative symbol of adventure, diaspora, exploitation, and hope. Using Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia,” she explores narratives of Atlantic crossings to unveil rich connotations in those always decisive moments of departure, arrival, and settling in. She argues that “the migrant’s voyage is not simply an economic fact, but also the theater of a complex cultural production in which the ship is transformed into a space and a vehicle of creation.”

Franca Bernabei’s article traces a crucial transition in the diasporic mapping of city spaces. She uses Samuel Selvon’s 1950s depictions of London and Dionne Brand’s more recent views of Toronto, attending to their divergent perspectives on the dynamics of movement and globalization, as well to the nuances of gender differences and historical location. In

the final essay of this section, Dorothea Löbberman focuses on European texts that narrate early experiences of Harlem tourism and explores how the authors construct notions of cultural identity through a dialectic of “strangeness” and “familiarity.” She introduces the idea of the tourist as a particular kind of traveler, one who seeks the pleasures of movement, as opposed to those migrants who move for economic or political reasons. The juxtaposition of the Harlem residents and the tourists who visit them also demonstrates the gap between perspectives: ethnic identity as an unstable site of conflict or as a stable and exclusive category.

From notions of travel, we move on to the section on **Desiring Space** and the way specific places are mapped in ethnic writing. Representations of particular places offer multilayered insights into immigrant culture and raise questions of assimilation, ethnic marking, and subject identity. Specifically, two approaches toward writing space emerge here: the first dealing with a memory of space in the past and the second pointing to an awareness of space being constructed in the present. The processes which have produced the characteristic formlessness of contemporary cities have become part of the artistic concerns of many ethnic writers who locate the growth and transformation of their chosen sites within a specific cultural and historical context. The places represented in many of these texts are distinctly plural phenomena constructed out of the interpenetration of past and present, colonization and immigration, and the cohabitation of different races and cultures. Again and again these writers give us an inside glimpse into the cultural mosaics that form contemporary cityscapes in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, revealing a wide range of divergent perspectives and practices, as well as modes of existence that coexist but often do not mingle.

Gita Rajan’s article analyzes the idea of “home” as represented in two novels by South Asian women—Meera Syal and Chitra Divakaruni—and explores the *situatedness* of these authors as a contested site. She also raises the issue of flexible citizenship by examining the limits of their desires to belong in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively. Using Avtar Brah’s observations on situated identity, Rajan discusses these writers’ representations of the cities their female protagonists live in, where the forces of cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and globalism color the narrative landscape. Helen Dennis focuses on Native American women writers and their depiction of “places of refuge” in the context of Bachelard’s notion of “felicitous spaces” and Toni Morrison’s idea of “inscape.” She argues that Native American women writers are creating a corpus of novels that requires a special attention to space; and offers a discussion on *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, as well as Silko’s *Ceremony* and Hogan’s *Power*, to indicate how attention to (in)felicitous space can open up the text for the reader and illustrate some of the ways in which these writers problematize Eurocentric phenomenological discourse. The final

essay in this section also focuses on representations of cities—Minneapolis and London—in the works of Louise Erdrich and Zadie Smith. Pirjo Ahokas compares the authors’ processes of constructing a mobile and gendered, mixed-race “minority” identity in these cosmopolitan contexts, and argues that contemporary women’s fiction creates interstitial spaces which become sites for openly claiming postmodern multiple identities.

The third section, **Imagining Identity**, opens with Monika Müller’s comparative essay on George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Müller examines these nineteenth-century writers’ investigations of the meaning of otherness as racial, sexual, cultural and religious difference, stressing Eliot’s reading of Stowe’s work and the manner in which her own writing mirrored the earlier texts. Michael Soto’s article argues that the discourse of American modernism anticipates and reproduces Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz’s model of transculturation “by routinely and provocatively imagining U.S. culture as the ever-evolving, hybrid offspring of Old and New World strains.” He notes that American writers and cultural studies critics see U.S. cultural institutions as engaged in a kind of reproductive process that necessarily involves overlapping theoretical and historical issues such as cultural nationalism, postcolonial cultural politics, ethnic identity formation, and Pan-Americanism.

In the article entitled “Slaying Modern Dragons,” Jacqueline Modeste compares Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* and Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar*, which improvises on the earlier legend. She discusses the ways in which Murray’s protagonist, Scooter, is linked textually with Malory’s Arthur and demonstrates how intertextuality and literary improvisation are used to create a blues-based American hero whose character forces us to revise the way we read any number of African American texts. LaVonne Ruoff’s essay traces the presence of European sites in narratives by Native American writers Leslie Marmon Silko and James Welch. By situating their characters away from their familiar places, Ruoff argues, they “focus on issues arising from the encounters between people from different cultures—how concepts of power determine relations between American Indians and non-Indians from the United States and Europe.”

Performing Ethnicity—the title of the fourth section—can be located in what William L. Andrews calls “Bookerese,” which is both the evocation of a discourse of sincerity in African American slave narratives and its simultaneous revelation as precisely “a rhetoric, a pose, a performance.” That ethnicity can never be defined once and for all is also discussed in the contributions by Alicia Otano on the situationally determined choice of varieties of English, by Mita Banerjee on the construction of German whiteness via its ethnic others in the TV mystery series *Tatort*, by Frank Salamone on the experiences of African American jazz musicians in Europe in contrast to those in the United States, and by Horst Tonn on rap music traveling from the United States to Germany and taking on new cultural dimen-

sions. While the articles at the beginning of this volume discuss people migrating to the United States, those in this section focus on the reverse, interdependent, and trans-atlantic movement of cultural phenomena. Here the phenomenon of traveling cultures has led our contributors to compare the creation, construction, and cultivation of these new sites of ethnicity.

The section on **Eating Culture** not only suggests the kitchen as a site of ethnicity and food as a means to identify and experience other cultures, as Seiwoong Oh argues, but eating and cooking also become important activities in the construction of one's own social identity in an often hostile host environment. As Glenn Deer argues—drawing on Sau-ling Wong and Frank Chin's concept of "food pornography"—food and sex become tools for a critique of restrictive social categories that decide about social inclusion and exclusion. While Oh and Deer agree that food constitutes (ethnic) identity, they also note the hybridization of foodways in an inter- or transcultural context.

In the concluding section of this volume, **Constructing Memory**, the past plays an important part in the construction of an (ethnic) identity and is evoked through myths on the one hand and individual and collective memory on the other. In her contribution, Angelika Köhler discusses the re-reading and re-writing of the La Llorona and Medea myths by German and Chicana women writers as strategies of empowerment. Women's revisions of traditional myths across ethnic lines reconstruct women's roles in the past and reveal the gender ideologies transmitted by these myths. Autobiographical accounts of migration and subsequent diasporic life often expose collective memory as an illusion, albeit a desirable one. Memory constitutes an important means for the preservation of ethnic communities, but memory also undergoes changes, as Agnieszka Bedingfield argues in her essay on "trans-memory." While autobiographies—as well as autobiographical essays and poems—profess a desire for the recovery of the "lost land" (Birkle) and for closure, they also reveal the processes of transferal, transition, and translation (Bedingfield).

African Caribbean Americans/Canadians and Irish women, as Carmen Birkle claims, often express the need for a re-writing and revision of official historiography to gain access to the oppressed and often literally buried histories of the Middle Passage and the lives of Irish women. Photographs, as Rosalia Baena argues, are enactments of such memory and sites of contested ethnicities for transcultural subjects who instrumentalize photography as an important link between self and place. African Atlantic slave gravesites, as Angela M. Leonard suggests, not only literally link the individual body and place, but—once rediscovered—also reveal a group narrative that has to be reconstructed. Remembering at these gravesites becomes an act of discovery.

* * *

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