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# anglistica

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- Anna Maria Cimitile** Nation, Belonging and *Méconnaissance*: Pauline Melville's *The Migration of Ghosts*
- Sara Marinelli** Impossible Origins and Adopted Selves: Traces of Identity in Jackie Kay's Writing
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- Floriana Perna** Englishness in Australia: The Idea of National Identity in Peter Carey's Novels
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- Mena Mitrano** On Diaspora, Coerced Mimeticism, and Surfaces: An Interview with Rey Chow

Englishness

Disease

Belonging

Origins

Diaspora

DissemiNation

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vol. 4 (2000), n. 2

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The radical reconfiguration over the last three decades of critical studies and what constitutes 'knowledge', whereby 'theory' and writing, literature and the 'social', poetics and politics have crossed each other's path, has led to an irreversible interrogation of previous autonomies. It would be simple to reduce this trajectory to a superficial social history that commences around 1968 and develops, above all, through the writings, both theoretical and literary, of new historical subjects distinguished by gender, ethnicity and minority status. However, these are also symptoms of an altogether deeper current that, to use the unfashionable concept of egemonia, draws our attention to the limits and crisis, both intellectual and institutional, of a particular historical-cultural formation and its subsequent arrangement of disciplines in the western academy. The confident nineteenth-century positivism and/or idealism that cultivated and established the present day divisions and distinctions of the social sciences and humanities (and the critical and historical sense of such terms are themselves to be investigated) is exhausted. Confronted by nervous retrenchment into orthodox backwaters or else the continual adjustment of the inherited discipline in order to continue to converse with change, the initial dispositif is now clearly in crisis.

Yet crisis is, of course, the very basis of criticism. This is to suggest a theoretical modality that is neither conservative nor merely accommodating. But if positivism and idealism are no longer able to mirror the world in their languages, if the confidence of a subjective objectivity orbiting around the universal I/eye (humanism) is justly afflicted by doubt, then critical work, whether in literature or anthropology, becomes an altogether more exposed, more vulnerable, undertaking. Whatever the response to such a situation, which, of course, requires recognition as a critical situation and not something to be brushed under the carpet, it becomes clear that a local response, for example restricted to the field of 'English literature', cannot be divorced from a wider comprehension of the crisis-criticism of the humanities and its particular tutelage of 'knowledge'. It is in this direction that the new series of *Anglistica* proposes to travel, drawing critical strength, above all, from an interdisciplinary approach that has historically developed within the vicinity of English literary studies, that of cultural studies. But, precisely because it is interdisciplinary, existing between and beyond existing disciplines, neither cultural studies nor the critical perspective proposed for this journal can claim the authority of an intellectual orthodoxy nor the institutional recognition of a disciplinary regime. Being vulnerable is an uncomfortable, but necessary, position to occupy; the only comfort it provides is the perpetual aperture, the opening, through which an intellectual challenge can continue on its way.

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## EDITORIAL

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930) Freud seriously questions the idea of community. In 1915 he had established the existence of a destructiveness “in the background” of the binding power of libido. At that time, however, it had seemed to him that destructiveness was “strongly alloyed with erotism”. Progressively, the existence of “a non-erotic aggressivity and destructiveness”, though it could not be fully demonstrated, gained a powerful hold on him. If people in general tend to reject this destructiveness, Freud realized that his thought had also followed the crowd and been no stranger to a similar “defensive attitude”. But the 1930 essay finally pays its debt to the “inborn human inclination to badness, to aggressiveness and destructiveness, and so to cruelty as well”. How might this foundational cruelty hold the notion of community accountable? Families, races, people, nations, Freud notes, no longer present themselves to the mind as cohesive wholes, merging in turn into the greater unity of mankind. The community-making process of civilization is undermined from within by the vicissitudes of cruelty. We do not know, Freud concludes, why community has to happen.

This issue of *Anglistica* might be read as a long gloss on Freud’s impasse. “Englishness and Its Discontents” was originally the title of the doctoral seminar held in the academic year 1999-2000 at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples. Most of the essays included here have evolved from presentations given at the seminar. In substituting Englishness for “Civilization” the participants had a double intent: first to affirm the contemporary relevance of Freud’s question (Why community?), secondly to inflect the term “community” historically with particular reference to nation and the sense of national belonging. As a productive area of critical investigation, the national tie here emerges through the interrogation and deconstruction of Englishness. The recent redrawing of the cultural boundaries that once separated England from its former colonies has dealt a blow to assumptions of Englishness. Once one of the most powerful and extensive of empires, a historical, cultural, and linguistic dominium now has to come to terms with internal corrosion and multiplicity. Englishness itself is

Mena Mitrano

**On Diaspora, Coerced Mimeticism, and Surfaces:  
An Interview with Rey Chow**

**Introduction**

Rey Chow is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Department of Culture and Media Studies at Brown University. One could typically remark about her, she has gone very far very fast. A native of Hong Kong, she was educated in the United States. She became a professor only nine years after getting her Ph.D. Between 1991 and 1998 she has written five books. Her *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995) won the James Russell Lowell Prize for MLA (Modern Language Association) authors, usually very hard to win. She serves on the editorial board of seventeen journals and is a compelling figure in the international scene. One of the main reasons for her fast career and her international renown is her contribution to the field of cultural studies. Cultural studies, Rey Chow contends, should not be seen as a poor relation of theory. She has especially exposed critical theory's almost ontological dependency on otherness, in particular theory's reliance on an internal otherness that obliterates other alterities. Accordingly, she has relentlessly exposed the racism and classism by theorists who denigrate cultural studies. If on the one hand she opposes seeing Western others as all the same, on the other, her work on China, as well as deconstructing the West/non-West bar, is especially attentive to the internal otherness in the Asian world.

I met Rey Chow at the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University where, from June 19 to July 26 2000, she taught a seminar, "Mimeticism and Cross-Ethnic Representation" and

delivered a lecture entitled “Fateful Attachments: On Collecting, Fidelity, and (the Modern Chinese Writer) Lao She”. In the interview both the theme of her seminar and the argument of her lecture are taken up for discussion. Although the interview is meant as a general introduction to Rey Chow’s work, the occasion in which it was taped inevitably determines its leitmotif, and this is Rey Chow’s engagement of theory. Therefore a few words on her seminar might be a useful way of introducing the conversation below.

Rey Chow’s seminar tackled the question of the imperative of mimeticism in an age of theory. Although with the rise of ‘signification’ mimeticism (imitation, representation, the literal, the thematic, etc.) became an outmoded concept, it continues to operate in representations of ethnicity. There seems to be an assumption that writing dealing with ethnicity must be realistic, must allegorize the nation, must pose the question of identity. So, if on the one hand mimeticism may be viewed as theoretically primitive, on the other it is imposed on the cultural productions of particular groups. The question of ‘coerced mimeticism’, as Rey Chow will refer to it in the interview, seems particularly relevant not only to scholars in the US but also to scholars in English Departments anywhere who, faced with the dilemma of having to ‘package’ ethnic or non-canonic authors, must choose between the imposition of national, historical allegory and the more textual, theoretical level, often struggling to find a fine balance between the two.

The interview took place at The School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

### The Diasporic Critic

MENA MITRANO: I thought we could start by talking a little bit about your second book, *Writing Diaspora*. You have written about the diasporic intellectual. This is a Third World intellectual who lives in the West, specifically in North American academia. Here, throughout the Nineties, the diasporic intellectual has gained increasing visibility. Consequently, the expectation has grown that s/he have a certain investment in minorities, in suffering, and in victimization, as you write.

Since the early Nineties your work has been a search for new strategies – other than the investment in the oppressed – to deal with the First/Third World, East/West divide. This is one of the original aspects of your work, and it certainly distinguishes your earlier work. In a way, you have been pulling the rug from under the diasporic intellectual’s feet, including your own. You have raised pedagogic issues about the kind of knowledge that is being circulated about the Third World. You’ve also raised political issues about the diasporic intellectual’s privilege. You have warned against the illusion that through privileged speech one is helping to serve the ‘wretched of the earth’. Ultimately your motto has been to write against diaspora. What kind of writing might this be?

REY CHOW: Yes. I think the particular piece of work you have in mind is that chapter in *Writing Diaspora* called “Against the Lures of Diaspora”. I should add that it’s not meant as writing against diaspora as such but against what I call the lures of diaspora. I haven’t had the chance to reread *Writing Diaspora* and that chapter, so I am speaking from memory. I believe that that chapter deals specifically with the situation of the study of China in North America. I remember asking questions such as “What are we doing as academics in the Nineties studying Chinese women, talking about Chinese women in North America?” The question about the lures of diaspora was raised in that context.

By lures, of course, I’m talking about some of the privileges that intellectuals have by being intellectual. This is something I will continue to insist on. The question is how we deal with the fact that we do accrue certain privileges while we write about the minorities, the oppressed, and so forth and so on. By writing “against the lures of diaspora”, I simply mean that we always have to remember there is that gap there between intellectual work and ‘the wretched of the earth’. We should not allow ourselves the illusion that simply because we are talking about these people we are really helping them. The kind of writing I had in mind is a writing that attends to the historical relations that actually enable this kind of work. But at the same time it is a writing that would be critical of the reinscription – of the unproblematical reinscription – of ethnicity and so forth, a writing that, I hope, would be aware of the limits of intellectual work,

even if only belatedly. It's simply a writing that is aware of its own limits, and at certain times of boundaries which, no matter how hard we try as intellectuals, we will not be able to cross or completely abandon. I guess I am more conservative in that regard. I think that, as intellectuals, we have to have critical imagination; but we must also be aware that we too are situated in discourse and have certain limits imposed on us.

M.M.: Along those lines, i.e. the problematic of inscription and reinscription, and of a reinscription that's not to produce once again the same power relations, can we talk about the native?

R.C.: The native?

M.M.: Yes, the native's silence. In a sense, the diasporic intellectual is engaged in a work of translation. S/he must translate the native for the West. Traditionally, in the process of cultural communication between East and West – a process, as you pointed out innumerable times, mired in colonialist and imperialist power relations – the native has inhabited the place of silence. You invoke classic attempts to fill this silence: Julia Kristeva on Chinese women, Roland Barthes on Japan, Malek Alloula on Algerian women. In these famous examples the silence of the native is filled by agents or witnesses who aim at restoring the voice of the victimized. You argue that by so doing they “neutralize the intranslatability of the native's experience”. One of the major contributions of your work in the early Nineties is that you move beyond the native as silent image and thus beyond the opposition between speaking subject and mute object. You do so by critically engaging Spivak's subaltern's unconditional speechlessness and Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, according to which the subaltern will always have already spoken in the master's text. By contrast, your position is that the native is an “*indifferent* defiled image” (my emphasis). That is, the native is both a silent object and the one who gazes at the colonizer in indifference, declaring the secret that the colonizer hopes to unveil in the silent object to be a phantasm. And this is really the point I wanted to get at.

You thus presuppose an “originary” gaze, one which is no more but which retroactively constitutes the colonizer's identity. This is

your theoretical move. We'll return to fantasy and how it has enabled your work in the second half of the Nineties. Right now, what makes your originary gaze different from a sort of native optical pre-symbolic? In other words, could you say more about the native's indifference?

R.C.: Yes, definitely. First, let me refer back to what you just said – for a couple of points of clarification. I think there are important differences among what you call ‘classic attempts’ to fill the silence of the native. Julia Kristeva was attempting to read in Chinese women a kind of unconscious for Western feminism. Roland Barthes translated Japan into what he called the empire of signs. In the case of Kristeva and Barthes, you can talk about a tendency on the part of leftist intellectuals in the West to go to places like China and Japan and discover some kind of alternative to the West. Now, Malek Alloula's book *The Colonial Harem* is different in nature because there his intention is really to return the Western gaze to the French colonizer. In other words, he is speaking as the protective male critic, defending the Algerian women who have been exposed to this relentless gaze of the Western camera. And there my critique of him is somewhat different, also it's more complex because in his case we have a native critic, a critic who, in fact, belongs to the same group as the women that have been objectified and who, in a paternalistic way, perhaps, offers a counter-attack on the Western critic. My critique is that in exposing the images of the Algerian women a second time, Alloula is unwittingly repeating precisely the very problem of objectification that he critiqued in the first place. I'd like to point this out as a clarification. As to Spivak and Bhabha, I think I am much more in agreement with Spivak's conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak, even though that has been very controversial, and she has herself subsequently modified and revised that argument.

I think Spivak's point originally was a simple one, namely that even when subalterns have spoken, their speeches are not necessarily heard. It is really a question of representations and how accessible those representations are. And I thought that her argument was simply that representation is always mediated by power relations so that when those who are disenfranchised attempt to speak, it is not regarded as a kind of representation that can be recognized.

Somehow, many critics, when they hear “the subaltern cannot speak”, tend immediately to jump to the conclusion that Spivak herself is denying the speech of the subaltern. I continue to think that that is a misreading of her very clearly articulated message. Bhabha’s argument about hybridity is something I am more critical of, because as I said in that essay, the notion of hybridity he proposes seems to imply that we can simply continue to look at the master’s text in order to find all the places, the gaps, the interstices where the subaltern has already spoken. I am skeptical of this because it can easily become an excuse not to deal with the subaltern at all. So, finally, I can now come to your question about the originary gaze.

I believe that I was thinking of the customary notion in colonial relations, the notion that it is the colonizer who begins the particular history of the place that he has conquered. Even today, the assumption is often that the history of the colony begins when the colonizer arrives. I can give you the example of my native place: Hong Kong. Very often when Hong Kong is discussed, the discussion typically begins at the point when the British arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. If the colonizer is the one who begins everything, then the colonized is always put in a reactive or secondary position. In *Writing Diaspora*, my attempt to argue that the colonized returns the gaze to the colonizer in the form of an indifferent defiled image is really an attempt to reverse that order of colonizer/colonized and the assumption that goes with it. I believe that that assumption is a suppression of the native’s history, and that history is not a pre-symbolic history. The colonized often already has a history but that history may not be recognized, as I said, because it is the colonizer who is seen as instigating reality in the colony. I think in the context of North America, too, the talk is such that there was nobody and nothing here until the white man arrived, and we know that is a myth and a historical lie. To add to that, at the end of my book on Chinese cinema, *Primitive Passions*, I offer a more detailed account of what such a gaze from the native might look like (in the very last section, when I talk about film, ethnography and cultural relations in the postcolonial age). I use the term translation in that context, in which the gaze of the native is really an objectified and commodified gaze. If you look at the images, let’s say, of Chinese women in the films of the 1980s and early 1990s, an argument could be made that there is a

kind of gaze there which is not entirely the result of the Western colonizer’s domination, rather the natives themselves – the native filmmakers, in this case – are in fact using the medium of film to construct some kind of counter-gaze via the objectified and commodified images of Chinese women.

### Ethnicity

M.M.: I’d like to move on to the question of multiculturalism, which has been debated so much over here. You have been very critical of the idealization of the other (actually, this might relate to the development of a counter-gaze) in the US academia at a time of multiculturalism. In fact, your 1995 article, “The Fascist Longings in Our Midst”, which I liked very much, and which is reprinted in *Ethics After Idealism* (1998), is an uncompromising critique of this phenomenon internal to American academic circles. It would certainly be wrong to call multiculturalism a fascist longing. Yet, multiculturalism seems to have performed an aestheticizing function. By projecting a landscape of ‘authentic’ differences that command contemplation rather than cognition, multiculturalism presides over the shift of politics (that is ethnic conflict) to aesthetics (the patchwork of differences), of the psychic realm (internal complexity) to the social realm (the surface of others). In particular, you point to the closing of the gap between the psychic and the social as a trademark of fascism. As I was suggesting earlier, multiculturalism runs the risk of shutting down critical inquiry in favor of the idealization of the other, as you phrase it. To what extent do you think the question of postcoloniality arises in response to the shortcomings of multiculturalism? To what extent does the postcolonial react to multiculturalism’s aestheticizing of political conflict – ethnic conflict, basically – and to its assertion of a socially complex landscape that in fact simplifies the psychic interstices, the in-betweens?

R.C.: It’s a very large question. I don’t know if I can do justice in my response to its complexity, but let me very quickly respond perhaps to some differences between postcoloniality and multiculturalism as I understand them.



I think if we are serious about the study of postcoloniality as such we have to do it historically. We have to do historical research on what kinds of postcolonial situations we are talking about. And it is through such research that we can really explore the racial-cultural differentiations that are, in turn, made into hierarchical differentiations. At the same time, the study of postcoloniality must address the colonial apparatus and the institutions that are put in place by colonialism in order to carry out its 'mission'.

M.M.: Education would be one...

R. C: Education, government, even urban architecture, because colonial powers have to have roads, for instance, means of transportation in order to perform their tasks. Wherever you go, where the British have been, for instance, the roads are always very good because they need the roads, they need the means of transportation and communication. . .

M.M.: Talk about translation and transportation...

R.C.: Exactly... in order to do what they need to do. Now the problem I have with multiculturalism, especially as a North American phenomenon: a lot of criticism that others and I have made of multiculturalism is really with a view to the fact that in contemporary America multiculturalism occupies a position to the postmodern that may be homologous to the position occupied by primitivism to the modern. In other words, we are talking about two comparable relations. If you think of the fascination with the primitive that is so much a part of high modernism and all the racial implications involved in that, it becomes possible to think that multiculturalism, too, occupies a position very similar to the fascination with the primitive, but it does so in the context of the postmodern. That's the context in which I would suggest that multiculturalism could be thought of in terms of some kind of fascist, primitivist longing. That is what I meant. My argument is a controversial one because, I guess, it undermines the more utopian and liberalist intentions behind many people's endorsement of multiculturalism. To that extent, I am not sure I see multiculturalism entirely in terms of an attempt to aestheticize political conflict. I agree

exactly with the way you put it. But, perhaps, rethinking my own argument, I would still put the emphasis on what I call idealism. In other words, whereas you think that there is a similarity in structure between idealism and aestheticization, I think idealism may also have to do with the attempt to simplify the complexities that structure our so-called others, and it is through such a simplification that the Western subject comes into its own complexity. For me, the whole point of idealism is that you render the other simple by turning her into something you adore, something you worship, something that is perfect in many ways. But the real purpose of that simplification is enabling the Western subject to become more and more *nuanced* and complex, and that's what I am critical of. That's the heart of my critique of idealism.

M.M.: I'd like to discuss a bit more your specific intervention in ethnicity now. Your most recent work, and in fact I am referring to the paper you presented here at the School of Criticism and Theory, "On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem", is a further elaboration of one of the mainstays of your critical intervention in general throughout the Nineties.<sup>1</sup> And the idea is that ethnicity is not simply a 'sociological fact' but a problematic in the transmission of knowledge. The case of the field of China studies, as you dealt with it, proves that this transmission is governed by a 'coerced mimeticism', and you coin this expression. As you write in "On Chineseness", this means that "minorities are allowed the right to speak only on the implicit expectation that they will speak in the documentary mode, 'reflecting' the group from which they come" (25).

Far from being limited to China-related studies, it seems to me that coerced mimeticism is an offshoot of the expansion and pluralization – via fragmentation – of the literary canon. While this expansion has here allowed a proliferation of new critical discourses, new voices can proliferate only on condition that they remain within the limits of 'reflectionism' as you term it, or the allegorical mode whereby text corresponds to nation or group. A text immediately implements a communitarian identity.

R.C.: Yes.

<sup>1</sup> "On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem" is forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*.

M.M.: Now, this is quite a prohibition, it seems to me.

R.C.: Yes. Especially since it is being reinforced in an academic space that is profoundly sensitized to poststructuralism and theory in general, with their vocation for problematizing correspondence, closure and essentialism.

M.M.: My question to you is how do you explain this unlikely cohabitation?

(Brief moments of laughter)

M.M.: How can the anthropological preservation of savage thought implicit in coerced mimeticism, as you so clearly describe it, survive side by side with theory's dismantling of virginal origins?

R.C.: That's precisely the question. You have put it in such a manner that I can only agree with it. How can poststructuralist theory be so aware of all these problems – of correspondence, closure, and essentialism – and at the same time allow us to keep thinking about certain cultures and peoples this way? I think it's an excellent question, one that I hope will become discussed more and more in the years to come. For now I just have a few points in response to that because I am still thinking about it. I am thinking about exactly this question you posed. So, let me offer some speculative thoughts.

One convenient way to start thinking about this would be to think back to some of the earlier texts of what we now call poststructuralism. To take, for instance, Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, because it is such an important work. I want to continue to acknowledge the way Derrida has in fact laid the groundwork, in that early work, for all the subsequent work in postcoloniality and cultural studies that we are still doing today. But what's interesting is that even in that early work, in which he fundamentally critiques the logocentrism of the West and our structured thinking and so forth, there are moments in which the non-West has been retained as a reified limit. I'm thinking, of course, once again of the Chinese difference and the way Derrida, like many European philosophers before him since the Enlightenment, imagined the absolute difference

of the Chinese language as an ideographic language. I'm referring to that whole argument.

M.M.: And you critique that in "On Chineseness" as well. You take that point and develop it there.

R.C.: Yes. I've also done a more detailed discussion of this point in a forthcoming short essay called "How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory".

(Laughter)

M.M.: The origins of theory...

R.C.: Again, even in this case when the West has been deconstructed, that whole operation is dependent upon a certain reification of the other as absolutely different, and my point again and again is: Well, how about the actual uses of the Chinese language, which are just as phonetic, you know, which are just as grammar-bound, and which are just as peopled with logocentric intentions?

M.M.: In other words, are you saying that a lot of rhetorical power is assigned to the Chinese language in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*?

R.C.: Exactly.

M.M.: Which is the objection that was made to you yesterday by someone in the audience: that [in your talk "On Chineseness"] you assigned too much rhetorical power to the term 'white'. That's interesting.

R.C.: That's exactly what happens, I think, in the poststructuralist critique of the West. The West is being deconstructed, debunked, criticized, and made entirely problematic but the West remains the focus of attention. The non-West turns into some kind of noble savage, noble image, actually silent. And so, in response to your question, I think it is now the time for us really to look at this problem seriously: what, after the idealization of the East in the

typical poststructuralist critique of the West? What do we move on to next? Perhaps this is the kind of place where we need to re-examine all the implications of poststructuralist theory while acknowledging the contributions it has made to the dismantling of Western thought.

M.M.: Isn't this one of the reasons why you were invited to The School of Criticism and Theory, because your intervention is a critique of post-structuralism from the point of view of someone who uses the tools of post-structuralism?

R.C.: I cannot speak for the directors of the School. I would certainly hope that that's one reason they feel they should have someone who speaks in a slightly different kind of voice.

### Fantasy, Surface, China

M.M.: China has been coming up, obviously, in our discussion so far. I'd like to focus on it more specifically. In order to put forth your view of ethnicity as a theoretical problem, you have relied on the case of China studies. In this field there seem to be two trends: on the one hand, the sinologist's nostalgia for an 'aboriginal' China that is no more and, on the other hand, the imperative of mimeticism in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. This is really a deadlock. You propose to break new paths in cultural translation by putting Chineseness itself under erasure, so to speak. Now, this does not mean doing away with the notion of Chinese identity – or indeed with any other notion of ethnic identity. It means that the notion of Chinese identity must, as you say, be "reevaluated in the catachrestic modes of its signification".

It seems to me that one such re-evaluation of the catachrestical meaning of 'Chinese' occasions your reading of David Cronenberg's movie *M. Butterfly*. There, a Western man, René Gallimard (played by Jeremy Irons) – and the spectator with him – is seduced by an Oriental woman and opera singer who turns out to be a man and a Maoist spy. The Chineseness of Song Liling (played by John Lone) is pieced together by serial imitations: she is a Chinese acting as a Japanese in Puccini's opera, a man acting as a woman, an Oriental

acting out the Westerner's orientalism. It is precisely these mimetic trajectories that, in your reading of Cronenberg's movie, permit one to arrive at a desubstantiation of identity and the exposure of the crafting fantasy (encapsulated by Gallimard's question to Song, "Are you my Butterfly?"). The movie, as you read it, retroactively constructs the Western man's identity as the melancholic attachment to an Orientalist fantasy, which Gallimard kills in the end as he kills himself. How does *M. Butterfly* complicate the notion of a coerced mimeticism, which you otherwise define as "the forced copulation at the juncture of text and ethnicity"?

R.C.: When Gallimard kills himself in that film, he is not so much killing the fantasy as he is completing it, because the fantasy about Madama Butterfly, you recall, is precisely the fantasy about her 'beautiful' self-sacrifice. So, if the fantasy is what he attaches himself to, then his suicide simply becomes a way to fulfill it, to completely act out the fantasy. Another way of saying it would be to say the fantasy plays him rather than him playing the fantasy. As to your much more difficult question of how the notion of coerced mimeticism could be read here, I'm not sure that I can pinpoint that in this particular text because the text is not really being produced from the perspective of an ethnic culture. Now, if you look at the play by David Henry Hwang, you may find it easier to make the argument about coerced mimeticism. Since this film was directed by David Cronenberg, who drastically changed the emphasis of the play, I'm not sure that my argument (about coerced mimeticism) would work here.

If you talk about the problem of Chineseness, your own explanation just now of the various changes undertaken by Song, I think, is itself an excellent way of dealing with the issue of mimeticism when it is connected to ethnicity. I must say that in my own reading I did not give Song that kind of complicated, *nuanced* reading. I was much more following the grain of Cronenberg's film text and my focus was on Gallimard himself. Perhaps we can talk about coerced mimeticism in the case of the Frenchman trying to become an oriental Butterfly. That would take the whole argument of mimeticism into a very new kind of dimension.

M.M.: Song, however, does exemplify a certain kind of mimeticist

act. It seems to me that in reading her (or him) you describe identity as a sliding chain of imitations.

R.C.: Yes, yes, I agree, and I think you have helped articulate that series of imitations extremely well.

M.M.: I really loved your reading.

R.C.: Thank you.

M.M.: Let's go back to the phantasm, to fantasy. In *M. Butterfly* an originary gaze from the Oriental retroactively constitutes the Western subject. This originary gaze – or, as we called it using your terminology, this indifference before silence – has allowed you to break away from the empasse of dichotomic thinking. It becomes clear that this indifference-before-silence that acts retroactively owes much to theory. This originary gaze you begin to theorize at the beginning of your career owes much to theory, in particular in your later work, it seems to me, and it owes something to psychoanalytic theory. But in the early Nineties you had some reservations about what you then termed “difficult” theory, which in your opinion functioned as a masquerade for guarding the dominant culture's equilibrium. Has your position changed since then?

R.C.: Are you referring to a particular text?

M.M.: *Writing Diaspora*. An essay in *Writing Diaspora*. In fact, if I am not mistaken, it is “Writing against the Lures of Diaspora”, I think.

R.C.: I see. I guess my position really has not changed. Beginning with my first book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, I have always presented theory as something with which you have to come to terms with. I don't think there is a choice there. But, as is always the case also, coming to terms with theory also means being aware of the implications theory has for the rest of the world. In this regard, I don't think my position has changed at all.

M.M.: Let me ask you, on that note, about psychoanalytic theory.

One of the questions raised here at the School of Criticism and Theory this summer has to do with the use of psychoanalysis by the literary critic. For example, Suzanne Gearhart raised it when she ventured that psychoanalysis can sustain – can be on the side of – a particular cultural politics.<sup>2</sup> By this she meant a politics of de-subjection in the Foucauldian sense. What about your use of psychoanalytic theory?

R.C.: Again, I would refer back to some of the discussions I offered in my first book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*. There is definitely a place for psychoanalytical theory even in the context of non-Western and postcolonial studies. Here again, I think of the case of modern Chinese literature in which, as I said in that book, there has always been a resistance to this kind of theory, and for a long time readers and critics dealt with characters in novels as though they were real people. Insofar as psychoanalytic theory helps pry open the whole issue of the individual and makes us see subjectivity itself as a problematic, I think it can be a useful means of intervention in non-Western study.

My question now is more with psychoanalytic theory's own investment in lack, in injury, in the whole notion of wounding as the very grounds for subjectivity. In other words, if I do not always use psychoanalytic theory for my own arguments, it is because I feel that psychoanalytical theory itself must be historicized. For instance, Freud's whole enterprise, from which I have learned so much – he will always remain one of my most favorite writers – really depends, I think, on the notion of lack, and everything that follows is constructed by way of a set of binary oppositions vis-a-vis that lack. I'm still interested in psychoanalytical theory today, I'm more interested in the historical conditions that allow certain kinds of questions to be asked rather than others. I'm interested in exploring a question such as: Why is it that a kind of theory which privileges lack becomes so important as a way of thinking about the subject?

M.M.: The subject, China, and Chinese film, I'd like to talk about

<sup>2</sup> Susanne Gearhart, “Freud in Algeria and Paris: Ideology and Affect in the Work of Jean-François Lyotard”, July 4, 2000, and “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Culture?: Repression, Performance, and Civility in the Work of Butler and Balibar”, July 11, 2000.

your book on these questions. This is my longest question. Please, bear with me. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) has won the James Russell Lowell Prize given by the MLA (Modern Language Association). In 1995?

R.C.: It was published in 1995 but the award was given in 1996.

M.M.: In this amazing book you take up directors like Wu Tiauming (*Old Well* 1987), Chen Kaige (*Yellow Earth* 1984), and Zhang Yimou (*Red Sorghum* 1988; *Judou* 1990; *Raise the Red Lantern* 1991) and argue for a continuity between these contemporary filmmakers and the use of the media by Mao at the time of the Cultural Revolution that was officially launched in 1966.

This continuity resides in what you call "primitive passions", meaning by that the search for "an imaginary foundation" of China's industrialized modernity. At the time of the Cultural Revolution, in the popular images of cheering crowds of Chinese waving their Red Book in a pose of adoration for their leader, you say Chinese people were knowing themselves as film, as individuals interpellated as film. They were therefore knowing themselves both as audience and spectacle, both as subject and object. This interpellation as film, you suggest, is simultaneous with the retroactive effect of film in creating an immemorial past, a past in which the Chinese, rather than shamed and humiliated by others (the Japanese in particular), are proud to be Chinese.

Now, can we move from the historical level to the theoretical one? I'm wondering how the mediatized subjectivity of film (which in your discussion is relevant to Chinese history) can be said to compare with a certain theoretical turn in the West toward 'film'. I understand film now as skin, membrane, as surface. I will explain.

Currently there is a generalized demand for a more extended notion of the political that can bypass, on the one hand, the paralyzing specularity of dichotomies and, on the other hand, the violence lurking in identity attachment such as nationalism, patriotism, etc. The need for an extended notion of the political has led to a rearticulation of the psychic and the social. It seems to me that, in this rearticulation, culture is now being reconceptualized as a

surface that lends itself to the registering of something that can easily slip away even from the most painstaking operations of ideological critique. That is, ideological critique is not useful anymore. We think of culture as a surface where something is registered, which means that it is both felt and unfelt at the same time.

I am thinking of Lyotard's unconscious affect: the forgotten before memory and forgetting. And I mention Lyotard because David Carroll has brought up the topic here at the School of Criticism and Theory this summer.<sup>3</sup> But I'm also thinking about one of your favorite writers, Walter Benjamin, and his wonderful domestic image of the sheets fluttering on the roofs of Marseilles, in one of his short essays. The sheets are surfaces affected by the immemorial action of the wind, so to speak. It's taking me a long time to ask this, but can China be construed, has it been construed, as the immemorial forgotten of Western theory? Has it been taken for the sign of a silent affection felt and unfelt at once by the Western surface?

R.C.: The immediate answer to your question, which I think is beautifully written up and thought up, would be: Yes, that in fact what we discussed a moment earlier has been this silent other surface. It's precisely what you are talking about here: that immemorial forgotten of Western theory. I'd like to add a little bit of a sociological note. In that essay that I referred to earlier, "How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory", I argue that the phrase "the inscrutable Chinese" actually has two possible senses: one is, of course, as in Derrida's case, linguistic: the Chinese language is inscrutable because for most Westerners it is unintelligible; it cannot be read, and it can conveniently become a kind of surface, a kind of image from which to dart back to the profundities of the Western subject and Western logos. But there is a more common, sociological sense to 'the inscrutable Chinese' because the phrase is widely recognized now as a racial stereotype, as a racist way of referring to the Oriental: they are all impenetrable, incomprehensible, etc. To that extent, then, we have high theory and sociology (low culture) coming together in this notion of the other as

<sup>3</sup> David Carroll's six-week seminar was titled "Contested Memory: Problems of Representation in History and Fiction".

a silent image and as a face, as a face that cannot be read, when in fact the 'inscrutability' only reflects the Westerner's non-comprehension. That's why I think this whole notion of Chinese as a face or as a silent language, as an image, is so thought-provoking. These two aspects of the inscrutable Chinese would be precisely what you are calling the construction of the immemorial forgotten in Western theory.

M.M.: Thank you so much for answering that question. Let's stay on surfaces a little bit. Surfaces are important in Zhang Yimou's cinematography. With Chen Keige, Zhang Yimou is perhaps the most popular contemporary Chinese director in the West. In his famous *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gao gao gua*; China Film Co-Production Corporation, 1991) he makes an exhibitionist display of a 'China' reduced to a seductive surface. Yet, you defend his self-subalternizing and self-exoticizing exhibitionism – the Oriental's Orientalism – as a tactic of defiance. Why?

R.C.: I will not go into how I defend him. People can read that in my text. Let me just say a couple of words about why I do that. Since I am a comparatist I'm always looking at things from both sides of the fence. One reason for defending Zhang is of course the whole discussion of Orientalism, the critique of Orientalism in the West. We are now so accustomed to criticizing Orientalism as 'bad' that we no longer are willing to understand the idea that perhaps Orientalism is not avoidable under certain circumstances. In addition, how do we begin to understand what looks like Orientalism that is being produced by Orientals themselves? It is in an attempt to respond to the latter question that I theorize what Zhang is doing by way of a sort of self-Orientalism.

But on the side of the China critics, readers, Chinese audiences, my point is rather that there is an overwhelming tendency to be invested in depth, in textual profundity, a tendency which comes with a lot of education and a lot of culture. Anything that seems to be about surfaces, such as Zhang's films, is immediately rendered suspect and all accusations of a collaborationist mentality, selling out to the West, pandering to the tastes of the Western audience, all of these very moralistic accusations tend to come out whenever the

issue of surface and profundity is being problematized in Zhang's earlier work. Because of this entrenched tendency in critical reading, I stand by my argument about Zhang's films as acts of defiance. If you understand the sort of contentious context in which his film must function, then his willingness to do what he does can only be seen as an act of confrontation; I'm using the term defiance in the sense of a deliberate confrontation with the forces that tend to be hostile to his innovations.

M.M.: Wouldn't his defiance also lie in the fact that he is aware that he is selling 'China' to a global market increasingly eager to know about China?

R.C.: Yes, I think so. I would like to emphasize that I don't know that Zhang himself consciously intends this kind of defiance.

M.M.: You wrote this in a chapter on him.<sup>4</sup>

R.C.: Because sometimes I listen to him talk in interviews and there seems to be no awareness at all of the theoretical implications of what he is doing. Hence I would trust his film texts rather than completely accept how he himself describes them. The other point, as you suggest, is that I believe that these contemporary Chinese films are really international films. Any attempt to just look for Chineseness or the lack of Chineseness in them would be a misguided attempt.

M.M.: Which takes us back to the importance of problematizing the issue of ethnicity. Last question. In the essay that gives its title to your most recent book, *Ethics After Idealism*, you discuss two critics' loves: Spivak's love for deconstruction and Žižek's love for the void and the world as a constant 'as if'. In these two loves you detect an ethics based less on the correction of error and more on open-endedness. What is your love?

<sup>4</sup> "The Force of Surfaces: Defiance in Zhang Yimou's Films", in *Primitive Passions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 142-172.

R.C.: I have to say that I disagree with your reading of my reading of Žižek and Spivak. You recall that I associate love with Spivak because she uses the word again and again to refer to deconstruction. But Žižek, I'm not sure we need to use the word love on him. I think he was talking more about his own investment in the Kantian sense of resignation, I believe that's what he said, so that, even when you know it will all come to a kind of void, you continue with a kind of enthusiasm as if there is a point to what you are doing.

M.M.: Could you call it attachment to the void?

(Laughter)

R.C.: An attachment to the void would be a contradiction in terms! I don't know how I can respond to this question because of the way you have posed it. I don't know if I could call Žižek's a kind of love. As I grow older my position is, I think, going to become closer to Žižek's than Spivak's. Perhaps. I don't know at this point.

M.M.: If the theoretical edge of your work, and I know critics have commented on this, is your own questioning of a very flat and simplified notion of identity, ethnic identity that is, you also seem to be attached very much to what you do. Actually in your seminar you said, never give up.

R.C.: Yes, I believe that for anyone to do their work seriously that kind of love and attachment ought to be there. I think ultimately that's the difference that distinguishes serious work from not so serious work. For instance, at the School of Criticism and Theory this year we hear certain presentations of theoretical undertakings with which we may not agree, but the serious and dedicated way in which such presentations were made really became itself a moving force, making people understand and acknowledge the passion of the presenter. I would like to think that perhaps my work has a similar kind of directional imperative to it: I try to persuade people of my passion for a certain object of study, of my belief in a certain way of learning.

M.M.: Would it be wrong to say that there is love of theory in your work?

R.C.: No, it would not be.

M.M.: Thank you so much for the interview. We all hope to see you in Italy, to hear you lecture in Italy.

R.C.: Thank you.

**A Rey Chow Bibliography**

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**SUMMARIES**