

Re-Imagining the Contact Zone: Ethnic Theory and the Fiction of Clarence Major,

Maxine Hong Kingston, Ana Castillo, and Gerald Vizenor

by

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RE-IMAGINING THE CONTACT ZONE: ETHNIC THEORY AND THE
FICTION OF CLARENCE MAJOR, MAXINE HONG KINGSTON, ANA CASTILLO,
AND GERALD VIZENOR

Benjamin D. Carson, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska, 2005

Adviser: Nicholas Spencer

My dissertation undertakes a comparative analysis of the intersections of fiction and theory in African American, Chinese American, Chicana, and Native American writing. I examine the conjunctions and disjunctions between discourses of fiction and theory within what I call an “internal ‘contact zone.’” While Mary Louise Pratt’s conception of “the contact zone” imagines contact and conflict with an “Other,” I conceive the “internal ‘contact zone’” as the dialogically agitated space *within* particular ethnic discourses. I look at the fiction of Clarence Major, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ana Castillo, and Gerald Vizenor alongside theorists like Ann DuCille, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and bell hooks, Rey Chow and David Palumbo-Liu, Chela Sandoval, Emma Pérez, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, and Gloria Anzaldúa, and Craig Womack, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Robert Warrior, respectively. The most contested issue that emerges from these critical analyses concerns the authenticity and integrity of the ethnic subject. Whereas Kingston and Castillo reinscribe essentialist notions of ethnic selfhood, theorists like Chow and Sandoval complicate and resist static definitions of subjectivity. Major and Vizenor, conversely, deconstruct ethnic identity and racial representation, while theorists like DuCille and Womack retain race and ethnicity as the central constitutive factors in identity formation. My work shows that the discourses of ethnicity within these contact zones are not homogenous, as some might claim, but highly variegated. Also, I argue that the nature of the encounter between fiction and theory within these “internal ‘contact

zones''' is determined largely by how each ethnic discourse is positioned with respect to dominant culture. For example, Native American critics oppose the critique of the subject because they regard it as an academic version of Western colonialism. By re-imagining the contact zone as the space within ethnic discourse, my work seeks to illuminate the internal dynamics of four ethnic American discursive fields and their complex relationship with dominant culture.

PREVIEW

**Re-Imagining the Contact Zone: Ethnic Theory and
the Fiction of Clarence Major, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ana Castillo,
and Gerald Vizenor**

Contents

Introduction	i
Chapter One	1
“Many forces at work”: The Early Fiction of Clarence Major and the Critique of Racial Economy	
Chapter Two	47
The Novels of Maxine Hong Kingston in Asian American Discourse	
Chapter Three	105
The Chicana Subject in Castillo’s Fiction and the Discursive Zone of Chican/o Theory	
Chapter Four	141
The “Cosmopolitan Consciousness” of Gerald Vizenor and Native American Literary Separatism	
Works Cited	247

Introduction

*“If I don’t write about you, you won’t write about me. I’ll stick with my favorite subject—myself—and I suggest you do the same.”*¹

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels predicted, as a side effect of capitalism, a worldwide transformation of the modes of cultural production. More than one-hundred and fifty years later, their words still resonate:

In place of the old local and national seclusions, and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (84)

But as the United States and indeed the world become increasingly culturally heterogeneous and integrated, as peoples and cultures come into contact with one another more and more and become inter-dependent, the literary scene in the U.S. generally and in the American academy more specifically has become increasingly segregated. While, as Gómez-Peña argues, in *Dangerous Border Crossers*, “nomadism and migration have become central experiences of millennial postmodernity” (11), American literature, ironically, is becoming balkanized as a new “*garrison mentality*” takes hold, one which breaks literature and life up into “ethnic, religious, sexual, class, and regional franchises” ((Vizenor, *Earthdivers* 11; emphasis original; Crouch 18).² Speaking in terms of race,

Paul Gilroy argues this separatist mentality may be due to what he calls a “crisis of raciology,” or the “lack of confidence in the power of the body to hold the boundaries of racial differences in place” (22). While Gilroy, here, speaks of a crisis of race and raciology, this crisis of “representation” certainly extends to ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, and nation, as, like the category of race, it is no longer easy to take recourse in these categories as stable signifiers or arbiters of identity. The deliberate fragmentation of American literature, and the retreat in America writ large into mono-ethnic neighborhoods, are reactionary *responses to* this crisis of representation. The difficulty of representing “Others,” and the anger that results from the (mis)representation of “Others,” has resulted in an enforced monologic-mentality that finally smacks of narcissism. Crouch succinctly describes this mentality: “*If I don’t write about you, you won’t write about me, I’ll stick with my favorite subject—myself—and I suggest you do the same*” (18; emphasis original). Because in “millennial postmodernity” the “subject” is fragmented,³ representation has become increasingly difficult; so by retreating into enclaves, various “ethnic” or “racialized” groups can monitor the way in which they are represented.

While such a crisis, as Gilroy suggests, opens up the possibility of disabusing ourselves of such categories, and concomitantly the abuse suffered at the hands of those who benefit from their enduring legacy, paradoxically, “in this anxious setting, new hatreds are created not by the ruthless enforcement of stable racial categories but from a disturbing inability to maintain them” (22). Gilroy goes on to argue, for those who fear miscegenation, “crossing as mixture and movement must be guarded against. New hatreds and violence arise not, as they did in the past, from supposedly reliable

anthropological knowledge of the identity and difference of the Other but from the novel problem of not being able to locate Other's difference in the common-sense lexicon of alterity" (105-06). It is not homogeneity, then, that leads to violence towards or the (often times violent) exclusion of the "Other," but the very heterogeneity (the result of "mixture and movement") that—as a result of proximity to or the inability to recognize an "Other"—was to temper if not entirely prevent violence and exclusion.⁴ Cultural integration, the result of stable categories of race and nation, for example, was to bring about a sense of solidarity with those who are no longer seen as "Other." As Richard Rorty argues, solidarity is "thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (192). Solidarity, as Rorty imagines it here, has much in common with what Derrida calls "unconditional hospitality" (Borradori 128).

And yet it seems, in some cultural spheres, the very dialogue with the "Other" that heterogeneity and proximity were to bring about has not occurred to any great effect within the literary and academic world.⁵ In fact, as Crouch observes,

as life in American becomes an ever more intriguing mix of styles, relationships, alliances, and even combinations of cuisine, things have gotten so mucked up and segregated in the world of literature that one does not expect American writers to tell us about anything other than themselves, their mono-ethnic neighborhoods, their own backgrounds, the narrowest definitions of the class from which they come, their erotic

plumbing and its meaning, how much or how little melanin is in their skin, and so forth. (19-20)

Rather than risk the “challenge of writing across the color” (23), gender, sex, or class line, writers have increasingly turned inward toward their own little territory, their own little corner of the world; and those who are highly invested in their particular corner of the world—for their sense of identity—have posted sentries at the “territorial limits” to guard against intruders (25). As Guillermo Gómez-Pena argues, “in reaction to the transculture” Marx predicted would arise as capitalism transforms cultural production, a new essentialist culture is emerging, one that advocates national, ethnic, and gender separation in the quest for cultural autonomy, “bio-regional identity,” and “traditional values.” This tendency to overstate difference, and the unwillingness to change or exchange, is a product of communities in turmoil who, as an antidote to the present confusion, have chosen to retreat to the fictional womb of their own separate histories. Even our so-called “progressive” communities are retrenching to a fundamentalist stance. (*New World* 11)

The result of this retrenchment is that identity—racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, class, human/non-human—becomes a kind of property, a cultural possession.⁶ And within the putatively “progressive” community of academia, the “culture as property” mentality is increasingly visible. African Americans, following this logic, “own” Nat Turner, and William Styron’s “crime,” according to certain African American scholars,⁷ was not necessarily that he wrote a *bad* novel about Turner, but that *he, a white man, dared to write a novel about Turner at all*. Styron dared to cross the color line; he, like

William Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses*, Cormac McCarthy in *The Stone Mason*, Kazuo Ishiguro in *Remains of the Day*, Richard Price in *Clockers*, and James Baldwin in *Giovanni's Room*, chose to “leave home,” to “step outside of what he or she happens to be in terms of class or sex or ethnicity or sexual persuasion” (Crouch 25), and to test himself by “finding out if [he had] the imagination to render vividly and believably people unlike the ones [he] grew up next door to” (50). Rather than encouraging such cross-cultural encounters in literature, which is part and parcel of “the creation of a multiparticipatory society” (Gómez-Pena, *New World* 15), it is increasingly the case that “anyone who steps outside of what he or she happens to be in terms of class or sex or ethnicity or sexual persuasion receives a scolding” from those who have designated themselves “the border guards of identity” (Crouch 25; Gómez-Pena, *Dangerous* 12).

The dream of a proper “world literature,” and what Gilroy calls a “cosmopolitan utopia” (284), has given way to enclaves, or what Crouch calls “mono-ethnic neighborhoods” (20). And in mono-ethnic neighborhoods the discourse is, not surprisingly, monologic; and it is often “one-sided” and “narrow-minded” (Marx 84). Writers talk to his or her own “people,” and they together construct “their” history.” The “people’s history,” then, is inevitably and often purposefully constructed in isolation, separate and free from outsiders—those “others” who have, one would assume, “their” own “people” and “their” own “history.” Group identity, and by extension, individual identity, is tied to this particular enclave. Who “I” am and what “I” am is defined within given parameters, and these parameters, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn argues, must be guarded.⁸ “We” define who “we” are. Not “them.”

Some may find such a Manichean mentality useful, but those, like Styron, Faulkner, McCarthy, Price, Ishiguro, Baldwin, Major, Kingston, Gómez-Pena, and Gerald Vizenor, among others, who risk leaving home, who risk transgressing territorial limits to disrupt spatial boundaries in order to create a cosmopolitan consciousness rooted in dialogue with “others,” view such thinking as pernicious and dangerous. Rather than turning inward toward his own ethnic neighborhood, Gerald Vizenor, for example, uses fiction to address the “epic complexities and appetites” (Crouch 28) of a whole host of characters from a variety of cultural locations. But more than that, his “stories”—like his “tricky” characters—seek to disrupt his readers’ mental categories that delimit experience and sap the “life energy” (Coltelli 165) that fuels their imaginations. Vizenor’s fiction invites readers to change and to “imagine themselves always and in a new sense” (164). He invites them to move out of their mono-ethnic neighborhoods and go out into the world, to meet, greet, and apprehend “the other in terms of mutual humanity” (Crouch 29).

It is increasingly clear, and deeply ironic, that in the “land of diversity,” no one “tolerates difference” (Gómez-Pena, *New World* 15). America—and the American academy—has become a space of “bizarre eclecticism where everyone must know their place [...] Artists and activists spend more time competing for attention and funding than establishing coalitions with other individuals and groups” (15).⁹ The problem may stem from the very notion of “tolerance” itself. As Derrida reminds us,

the word “tolerance” is first of all marked by a religious war between Christians, or between Christians and non-Christians. Tolerance is a *Christian* virtue, or for that matter a *Catholic* virtue. The Christian must

tolerate the non-Christian, but, even more so, the Catholic must let the Protestant be. Since we today feel that religious claims are at the heart of the violence [...], we resort to this good old word “tolerance”: that Muslims agree to live with Jews and Christians, that Jews agree to live with Muslims, that believers agree to tolerate “infidels” or “nonbelievers” [...]. Peace would thus be tolerant cohabitation. (Borradori 126-27)¹⁰

What Derrida makes clear is that “tolerance,” far from suggesting an unconditional equality—the idea that “your” ideas/beliefs/values/morality/ethics are just as good as “mine”—implies an unspoken hierarchy; it is “always on the side of the ‘reason of the strongest’” (127). While “my” values are clearly the “right” ones, I—because of my “benevolent liberalism”—will *tolerate* your *otherness*, your deviation from the one true path.¹¹ Tolerance, in other words, “is a supplementary mark of sovereignty, the good face of sovereignty, which says to the other from its *elevated* position, I am letting you be, you are not insufferable, I am leaving you a place in *my* home, but do not forget that this is *my* home” (127; emphasis mine). Tolerance, then, as “the good face of sovereignty,” is a slight of hand.

In place of the notion of tolerance, Derrida posits “hospitality.” Tolerance, for Derrida, is “conditional hospitality,” or a “scrutinized hospitality, always under surveillance, parsimonious and protective of its sovereignty” (128). Conditional hospitality is offered only “on the condition that the other follow our rules, our way of life, even our language, our culture, our political system, and so on” (128). In contradistinction to tolerance, then, Derrida suggests “pure and unconditional hospitality, hospitality *itself*, [which] opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected

nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign *visitor*, as a new *arrival*, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other” (128-29; emphasis original).

Within the U.S., it is not “hospitality” but “tolerance” that is “most commonly practiced by individuals, families, cities, or states”—and, not surprisingly, academic departments (162). The campaign for tolerance so pervasive in contemporary America and American academic institutions has, as one of its many manifestations, taken the form of the “scrutinized hospitality” (128) otherwise known as Ethnic Studies. Not surprisingly, Ethnic Studies is “always under surveillance” (128) by the powers that be, who are often those “conditionally hospitable” benevolent liberals, and whose “sovereignty” is protected by those entrenched within its various enclaves. The existence of Ethnic Studies, then, signals the triumph of the “good face of sovereignty” (127), rather than a movement toward “hospitality,” which is “fundamentally the right of invitation and as such lays the conditions for international and cosmopolitan conventions” (162).

Whereas Marx envisioned an international and cosmopolitan literature—World literature proper—the balkanization of English departments into ethnic neighborhoods has resulted in a return to the kind of narrow-mindedness that is the hallmark of segregation. While the inclusion of “ethnic” literatures in English departments historically dominated by Anglo-American literature is often celebrated as evidence of the victory of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, it is also rightfully seen skeptically as inclusion masking containment of the ethnic “other.” What looks like desegregation, the hallowed halls of academe opening its doors—in a benevolent gesture of “tolerance”—to those formerly excluded, upon inspection, looks a lot like an academic

version of Jim Crow: separate but equal departments. (Though, as history has shown, separate is never equal. The lack of funding for Ethnic Studies programs speaks to this reality.)

The creation, then, of Ethnic Studies departments can be seen as an act of ideological containment on the part of American academic institutions.¹² What appears as an opening up of “traditional” disciplines—and the “canon” of literature that “traditionally” constituted those disciplines—masks a desire to defend established parameters by segregating the potentially threatening “other” in its own, in this case, “ethnic” enclave. It is true, though, that we must not underestimate the importance of the inclusion of literatures by those formerly deemed “Other.” There is certainly a “utopian potential” at work in such a move (Palumbo-Liu 416), and it does point toward a genuine multiparticipatory society in which everyone has a *voix*.¹³

But by segregating those voices, the articulation of opposition to dominant ideology is muted, if not, neutralized. If art functions to disrupt ideology by distancing it enough to allow its content to become visible and thus available for critique,¹⁴ “ethnic” literatures, by dint of being marginal, that is, by being the “other” of dominant ideology, occupy a position especially conducive for ideology critique. As Ramón Saldivar argues, one rationale for studying “ethnic” literatures as part and parcel of the general problematic of American literature as a whole (rather than seeing them as merely “regional” or “marginal” phenomena of interest only to a specialized literary fringe) is that the masterworks of the dominant literary culture are the dialogical negations of the marginal texts not sanctioned by the hegemonic culture. As the silenced voices of opposition, these other

marginal texts serve to highlight the ideological background of the traditional canon, to bring to the surface that repressed formation Jameson has called the “political unconscious.” (17)

Yet the efficacy of this critique rests in its ability to transform dominant ideology. While such a critique does “bring to the surface” the machinations at work in dominant ideology to suppress marginal voices, the very (ideological) architecture of the academy ensures that those voices remain contained within what Rey Chow calls an ethnic “ghetto”: a space “evacuated by white people” who willfully or at the behest of “others” stepped aside, leaving the work of Ethnic Studies to those “authentically” “ethnic.” The result of this antimiscegenation is that Ethnic Studies, broadly conceived, risks being “successfully delegitimated as a viable field of study, while the blame for its loss of credibility could, once again, be comfortably laid at the door of those self-same people of color and their acrimonious identity politics” (Chow 16-7). “Sovereignty” is thus a double-edged sword. Here it is the “good face of sovereignty” that masks what Derrida calls “conditional hospitality.”

So while academia is busy touting tolerance and diversity, structurally it remains segregated. Tomo Hattori succinctly articulates this irony: “As a project thus endorsed in the social mission statements of corporations, government agencies, and educational institutions, the implicit goal behind the articulation of ethnicity and its more common catchphrase ‘diversity’ is to neutralize the politically and socially disruptive potential of racial, ethnic, and other cultural differences in ways that inevitably contradict the processes of difference and hybridity” (“China Man” 216-17). Challenging the segregationist attitude so pervasive in “cultural institutions,” Gómez-Pena argues that

“our cultural institutions can perform an important role: they can function as experimental laboratories to develop and test new models of collaboration between races, genders, and generations, and as ‘free zones’ for intercultural dialogue, radical thinking, and community building” (*New World* 16). The institution that Hattori and Gómez-Pena imagine has, in our current climate, an almost utopian ring to it. A “free zone,” what Gómez-Pena also calls a New World Border, is a space where borders oscillate and identities multiply; a subject “performs multiple roles in multiple contexts,” and is always shifting (12).

Any political project *genuinely* interested in creating multiculturalism, which, as Gómez-Pena reminds us, is “part of the larger project” of creating a *genuine* “multiparticipatory society” (15), would resist the kind of separatism currently passing for benevolent liberalism; concomitantly, any institution serious about “difference and hybridity” would divest itself of the kind of thinking that makes “free zones” “cultural zones” of exclusion (Hattori, “China Man” 217). The “anti-racist project” Tomo Hattori articulates is, in my mind, a viable and necessary corrective to the conspicuous “racism” universities practice by maintaining and managing ethnic ghettos.¹⁵ Hattori writes:

Rather than use race and ethnicity for the purpose of delineating the boundaries and specificities of cultures, voices, and essences (foundational concepts in the project of ethnic literary criticism), an anti-racist project aligned with the elimination of social oppressions and inequalities calls for the gradual phasing out of the Ethnic Studies paradigm as we know it. The retirement of the well-intentioned culturalist segregation under ethnicity would be accompanied by the abandonment of the models of impermeable

individual identity, ethnic singularity, and cultural accommodation under nationalism that have been the foundations of Ethnic Studies discourse in the three decades that it has been in existence in the United States. (217)

To create what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “contact zone,” a social space “where disparate cultures meet, class, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 4), culturalist segregation must be abandoned so “peoples geographically and historically separated” *can* “come into contact with each other” (6). The dissolution of Ethnic Studies departments, that is, the opening up the borders between races and ethnic groups and relieving the border guards of identity of their duties, would, in effect, represent a move toward a “contact perspective” that is mimetic of contemporary American, one that takes into account difference and hybridity. As Pratt argues, “a ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and ‘travelees,’ not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (7). Dismantling the barriers that separate groups and peoples will allow for greater interaction between and among “subjects” and greater interplay between dominant ideology and oppositional voices, which will inevitably reshape both dominant ideology and the voices of opposition.

While contemporary America is already a veritable “contact zone,” academia, in this respect, lags behind, as the border guards of identity are still on the job. The desire of some ethnic scholars to retain a degree of autonomy from dominant ideology—manifested in Anglo-American discourse—drives much of the discourse within Ethnic

American writing. While separatists oppose Western theory, many ethnic writers have embraced certain facets of Anglo-American discourse, including theories grounded in a Western (rather than indigenous) episteme. In fact, the place of these theories within Ethnic American writing has caused no small degree of consternation among scholars of ethnic fiction. Part of the reason why so many Ethnic Studies scholars want a department of their own is to weed out Western influences (and scholars of Anglo-American descent). Because post-structuralist theory, for example, is a product of continental theory (from Saussure to Derrida), utilizing it to analyze ethnic and/or indigenous texts is seen by some as tantamount to Western imperialism. Purists, like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, not only want to forget Foucault, but every continental theorist who has put pen to paper since Napoleon Bonaparte, while Craig Womack has never found anything of Lyotard's worth wearing.

The rejection of Western theory and philosophy, though, has much to do with its critique of the monadic subject. In the words of José David Saldívar:

It seems a bit ironic that just when all of these [mainstream] critics are talking about the end of the subject [...] that we should have Chicanos, peoples of color, and feminists, finally beginning to see themselves as subjects, as capable of action instead of just being acted upon [...] It may not be a coincidence that mainstream critics are talking about the end of the subject just when those people who have been cut off from power become aware of their potential role—as subjects—within the historical moment. (Chabram 132-33)

In “Postmodern Blackness” hooks echoes Saldívar, asking rhetorically, “should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the ‘subject’ when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time” (28). As a reaction to the critique of the subject, many scholars of Ethnic American literature—whether Chicana/o, Asian American, Native American, or African American—“cling defensively to modernist notions of identity” (Hattori 218), arguing that retaining an ethnic or racialized monadic subject is the only way to make “their claims as legitimate subjects within American civil and cultural institutions” (218).¹⁶

This situation is unstable because within and between ethnic theory and fiction different views on separatism are articulated, and numerous attitudes toward Western theory exist among ethnic writers. In terms of the way fiction writers and theorists imagine the ethnic subject, the relation between fiction writers of color and theorists of race and ethnicity within African American, Asian American, Chicana/o, and Native American writing is dynamic and often volatile. In “Re-Imagining the Contact Zone: Ethnic Theory and the Fiction of Clarence Major, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ana Castillo, and Gerald Vizenor,” I undertake a comparative analysis of the intersections of fiction and theory within these four spheres of Ethnic American discourse. I examine the way in which Maxine Hong Kingston, for example, imagines and (de)constructs the “subject” in her fiction and then juxtapose this “subject” with the subject as imagined and (de)constructed by theorists of Asian American fiction. In other words, I look at the way fiction writers “meet, clash, and grapple” (Pratt 4) with the theorists who share their “ethnic” or racialized “academic sector” (Chow 16). I call this space in which this encounter takes place the “internal ‘contact zone.’” While Pratt’s conception of the

“contact zone” imagines contact and conflict with an “Other,” I conceive the “internal ‘contact zone’” as the dialogically agitated space *within* particular ethnic discourses.

In Chapter One: “‘Many forces at work’: Clarence Major’s Early Fiction and the Critique of Racial Economy,” I examine the way Ann DuCille, bell hooks, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. theorize the black subject. Within the context of the theoretical discourse generated by these theorists, I then turn to Major’s work to determine how he (de)constructs subjectivity in his novels *Reflex and Bone Structure* and *Emergency Exit*. In Chapter Two: “Maxine Hong Kingston in Theory and Praxis,” I look at Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, and *China Men* against the background of theorists Rey Chow, David Palumbo-Liu, and Tomo Hattori.

In Chapter Three: “The Chicana Subject in Castillo’s Fiction and the Discursive Zone of Chican/o Theory,” I look at the fiction *and* theory of Ana Castillo in light of the theoretical work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Emma Pérez, and Guillermo Gómez-Pena to determine how the Chicana subject is imagined on “the borderlands.” In Chapter Four: “Gerald Vizenor’s ‘Cosmopolitan Consciousness’ and Native American Literary Separatism,” Gerald Vizenor’s fiction and theory is examined in the context of the most prominent issue in the discursive zone of Native American writing: Indian identity.¹⁷ As Maureen Konkle writes, “the criticism of Native American literature takes for its principle object that literature’s expression of Indian identity, a ubiquitous term that generally assumes an inborn Indian consciousness” (151). Because Vizenor embraces Western theoretical paradigms, which posit a non-unified subject, his work is at odds with separatist critics like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Craig Womack, among others, who “assume an inborn Indian consciousness” (151), one that must be harnessed and

given voice if indigenous peoples are going to effectively oppose Western colonialism—whether in the form of expropriation of land, appropriation of traditions, or the imposition of a Western episteme by, among other institutions, the American educational system.

While my choice of novelists may seem rather arbitrary, I wanted to look at writers who were well-known within their particular discursive field. The exception, of course, is Clarence Major, who is neither well known to either the general reading public nor to academics. So while I chose to examine Kingston, Castillo, and Vizenor *because of their status within their respective discursive zones*, my decision to examine Major is due to his conspicuous absence within African American theoretical discourse. Why this is the case is the subject of Chapter One.

Within the discourse of Asian American literature, Kingston is not only seen as a successful ethnic author, but her novels are viewed as “model[s] of [...] successful ethnic nationalist narrative[s]” (Hattori, “China Men” 228). Except for Frank Chin and the *Aiiieeeee!* group’s criticisms of her work, Kingston’s reputation among Asian American scholars is beyond reproach. My reading of her three “novels,” *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*, within the context of the work of certain theorists of Asian American literature, evaluates the way Kingston (de)constructs the “ethnic” subject, and asks whether or not what Kingston’s work *does* is commensurate with what Ethnic Studies scholars say it *is*: a challenge to hegemonic ideology and bourgeois individualism.

Like Kingston, Castillo, in the world of Chicana writing, is a superstar. Only Sandra Cisneros has achieved the kind of public and critical attention as Castillo. Her

poetry and prose, as well as her volume of criticism, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, have received national and international acclaim. While her work has been received with greater enthusiasm in Europe than in America, her writings in the States have captured the public's attention and have garnered a number of prestigious awards, including the American Book Award in 1987 for *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Chicana activists praise her work for opening an imaginative space in which Chicanas can “self-fashion” or, in the words of Claudia Tate, “activate self-identity” (6). In Chapter Three I look at Castillo’s fiction not only in relation to Chicana theorists, but her own theoretical work.

Within the discourse of Native American fiction, Gerald Vizenor is enigmatic. He is quite possibly the most prolific contemporary writer in American literature, and he is exceptionally versatile, publishing haiku, journalism, novels, and critical theory. What makes Vizenor enigmatic as a Native American author is his willingness to use—in postmodern fashion—anything and everything at hand to construct a narrative. His blending, in his fiction, of Anishinaabe beliefs with postmodern theory is his most important contribution to American literature, but it is this move—and its implications for the Native subject—which has created a stir within the discursive space of Native American writing. In Chapter Four I examine Vizenor’s work in light of Native American literary separatists who insist on excluding ideas, beliefs, values that do not originate from an indigenous world view.

What is clear is that the nature of the encounter between fiction and theory—and how writers and theorists imagine the “ethnic” subject—within these “internal ‘contact zones’” is determined largely by how each ethnic discursive sector is positioned with respect to dominant Anglo-American ideology. The divisive debate surrounding the

authenticity and integrity of the ethnic and racialized subject *within* the discursive zones I examine often mirrors the increasingly *inhospitable* and acrimonious relationship between people of color and Anglo-Americans in contemporary America. This project is, in many respects, diagnostic. By listening to the dialogue within certain ethnic spheres, scholars and activists might better be able to bring to the surface and recognize the formerly repressed concerns of ethnic subjects, and move together toward greater understanding, genuine inclusion, to create finally a space hospitable to each and all.

PREVIEW