

Gilbert H. Muller. *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999. 270p.

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This book is for those who wish to incorporate immigrant literature into their courses or who seek a good introduction to contemporary immigrant fiction. Muller discusses some forty novels and numerous short stories in a survey of post-Holocaust, Chicano, Latino Caribbean, African Caribbean, and Asian American fiction. While the book works fine as a survey, Muller tries to do more with it. Muller's thesis is that postwar immigrant fiction has reshaped the American literary landscape by revaluing identity and creating new historical intersections.

Starting from Giddens' idea that diversity, instability, and difference are positive rather than negative forces in the construction of radicalized modernity (*The Consequences of Modernity*), Muller shows how immigrant fiction has radicalized American democracy.

The shifting contours of immigrant identity, as people of color redefine the relationship of the Third World to the First World and of the margin to the center, promote the radicalized version of American democracy that I hope to elucidate in this study. (9)

The postcolonial directions of this statement—specifically the reference to people of color redefining margin to center—make problematic the inclusion of post-Holocaust fiction. To prove his conception of a radicalized American democracy, Muller has to justify placing Bellow, Singer, and Ozick in with Mukherjee, Garcia, and Kincaid. To do so, he has to weave patterns both great and small. The great pattern is the postwar, postmodern condition from which multicultural and nomadic movements emerge and through which we gain perspective on certain cataclysmic moments: the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, the Cuban revolution of 1959. The small pattern is in the figure of the “immigrant survivor,” the common thread in all the stories. The immigrant survivor is any character who has been victimized by immigration policy, has been displaced and uprooted, suffers the duality of being in America yet feeling distanced from it, and is marginalized by the dominant culture. Thus, Ozick's Rosa Lublin is not much different from Garcia's Lourdes Puentes for both are caught in the cusp of the historical ebb and flow, and both are displaced persons trapped in transnational intersections. But cannot the same thing be said of Puzo's Michael Corleone? The danger here is that in promoting inclusivity Muller risks being essentialist, assimilative, homogenous. His insistence on bringing post-Holocaust fiction in line with ethnic literature is

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a brave step toward redefining the scope of American literature, but in constructing an overarching commonality, he overrides race.

The book's triumph is in Muller's discrete exemplifications of exile and in the extraordinary variety of his selections. The texts he chooses are viable, current, and may be ones we have overlooked. In the section on Asian American fiction, he discovers for us Maxine Hong Kingston's lesser known *Tripmaster Monkey*, as well as work by other Asian American writers—for example, Filipino writers Jessica Hagedorn and Bienvenido Santos, Indian writer Bharati Mukherjee, and Vietnam-born writer Lan Cao.

Another strong point is Muller's adherence to history as both background and the stuff out of which fiction emerges. His coverage is replete with data about immigration law and discriminatory policies. The best part of his theorizing is his idea that immigrant fiction is not only a consequence of history, but it also re-makes history. His paradigm for contemporary immigrant fiction is Caribbean writer Russell Banks' *Continental Drift*. Says Muller: "By constructing the slowly converging narratives of a contemporary American migrant and a Haitian immigrant, Russell Banks . . . retells and reinvents the nation's story. By merging interacting cultures, with their colliding myths and histories, he draws attention to the ways in which a hybrid nation is reassembling itself" (232). It's a good notion: that the immigrant experience is still in process, that it definitely is part of the evolving story of America, and—if only for the space of this book—we feel its elusive nature within our grasp. ✨