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Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien. *Weird English*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. 339p.

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Evelyn Ch'ien's title *Weird English* exemplifies its purpose and point: weird English is the mispronunciations and malaprops of first-generation English speakers adopted by successive generations as aesthetically and politically-driven written expression: as a way of "takin' the community back" (6; italics retained). According to Ch'ien, weird English not only "constitutes the language of literature" (4), but consequently "brings new theory into being" (4).

Because *Weird English* addresses issues important in humanities and social studies, I will note a few of Ch'ien's premises: that language weirding is not new, but as it collided with 20th-century ethnic awareness its users evolved from naïve practitioners to conscientious appropriators seeking a language authentic to their ethnic hybridity; that languages embody cultural hierarchies; that the immigrant's dilemma never ends, but rather with each successive generation it is reconfigured anew. For second- and third-generation Americans who (for reasons which may range from physical to psychological) may be outsiders in the greater popular culture and (because they are linguistically and therefore socio-economically empowered) outsiders within a familial, homeland-inspired culture, a stinging angst permeates English interaction. For Chi'en, for many of us, English is a reminder that we no longer speak homeland languages. Does that mean, Chi'en asks, that we forfeit our histories to artifactual status?

Ch'ien sees weird English as an imaginative act (*pace* Benedict Anderson's *Imaginary Communities* and Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*) recorded (especially in the sense of role-playing), noting that imaginative acts are painful and neurotic (48). Weird English, she writes, "wants to do more with English than communicate *what* the subject is; it also wants to show *who* the speaker is and *how* the speaker can appropriate the language" (8). My concern here is that Ch'ien has taken a segment of multicultural literature and posited in a manner that makes it particularly vulnerable to ogling by cultural voyeurs (*pace* Susan Hawthorne). Must the weird English writer be an ethnic and therefore (per multicultural text marketing) a fringe writer? And in terms of theory, the insistence upon author as subject perpetuates a major flaw with postcolonial and multicultural literary critiques: the author cannot be dead in some literature and quite present in others (*pace* Paul Cantor).

Ch'ien's literary analysis includes Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and Junot Diaz: a diverse group explained, in part, as Ch'ien unfolds weird English as having metaphoric as well as literal properties

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(21). For example, Ch'ien sees Nabokov's *Pnin* as "illuminat(ing) the immigrant need to acquire imaginary estate—the immaterial estate of language" (61). For *Pnin*, Ch'ien writes, "English is still elusive in pronunciation and unfertilized by experience" (71)—it is nothing without a community. (Intriguingly, in that her analysis here characterizes language as solely social negotiation, she furthers the work of Donald Davidson, an Anglo-American philosopher.) Thus, according to Ch'ien, in *Lolita*, weird English is represented as a pedophile's utopia—a nowhere which gives way to language which, therefore, must be created for no one (104).

The great merit of Ch'ien's text is in the way it uniquely contextualizes a world Englishes orientation while interrogating postcolonialism. For instance, in the chapter titled "Chinky Writing," Ch'ien herself becomes the weird English writer (which lessens the often disconcerting distance between critic and subject) and asserts that through Kingston Chinglish evolved from "gritty immigrant origins" (140), linguistic pragmatism, to "a burgeoning multicultural America" (140) where the consequences of refusing to privilege English has led to an art form. But such evolutions, of course, are ongoing; they cannot be explained through a dialogue that insists upon the rhetoric of retrospection. As long as the prefixes are retained, the discourse sustains inscrutability: Ch'ien notes Homi Bhabha (247). Weird English, in contrast, simply connotes "The Shit That's Other" (201).

In "Losing Our English, Losing Our Language," the final chapter, Ch'ien builds upon Derrida's notion of all writing as inextricably tied to "genealogical anxiety" (Derrida 124) and supports concentration on current colonialism through an analysis of Rushdie's work suggesting that it speaks "the language of contemporary India and the world, one that mirrors the lack of certainty in the world's facts and truths" (265). After all, Rushdie creates polylingual text, weird English, literary language that represents the "multiple loyalties, multiple linguistic communities, and the multiple anxieties of several histories" (248).

While Chi'en's text does succeed in supporting the need for theory that allows for Englishes without relying upon inner/outer circle English models, I hope Chi'en's next text clarifies several points.

First, Ch'ien makes assertions pertaining to spoken language. As so-called standard English is a matter of theory and writing, certainly not everyday speech, and the theoretical underpinnings from which she predominantly draws are derived from continental philosophy as opposed to Anglo-American philosophy (which addresses spoken language to a much greater degree than its European counterpart), this presents a problem. If Ch'ien is going to address both verbal and written expressions, then, in deference to these distinct academic dialogues, she should present a rationale for doing so.

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Second, Ch'ien simultaneously defines weird English as necessarily derived from non-native English (11) and builds a case for second-generation American angst (which surely must include native English speakers whose parents struggle to express meaning incompatible with English). Along these lines, Ch'ien categorizes her subject authors as writers of English for whom English was not a first language, but does not distinguish further. When one considers that Nabokov spoke and wrote English from early childhood and that Rushdie's initial encounters with English were as another of the homeland languages, it seems an important point. In other words, if we find it necessary to note that English is not a writer's first language, then isn't it equally important to differentiate where English is a schooled language, where it is among native languages, and where it is a cultural or familial battleground?

Finally, because this text is fundamentally interdisciplinary, I regret that Ch'ien does not carefully define terms. If we are opaque in our thinking about words such as "hybrid," "polycultural," and even "ethnicity" (and a review of English studies critical works demonstrates we are), then we risk too much in using them.

Even so, I have been reading *Weird English* for more than two years and have found its courageous, complicated claims relevant to more sub-discipline work than I would have initially predicted: humor studies, the intersection of Anglo-American philosophy and literary language, gendered language, and composition studies. Weird English should be furthering, that is to say disrupting, many dialogues. \*

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