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REVIEWS

All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures. By Bonnie TuSmith. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993. 216 pages. \$34.50 cloth.

Bonnie TuSmith readily admits that the “handful of works” examined in her study “hardly covers the field of multi-ethnic literatures today” but immediately goes on to say that her “specific purpose” is to “consult neglected voices in the population on a classic moral issue: namely, what do ethnic Americans think about the issue of individualism versus community, and how are these viewpoints portrayed in their written art?” (p. 28) One answer might be that *individualism* and *community* are broad enough terms to be used in a description of any human activity whatsoever—and ethnic American writers, like all writers, have so many thoughts on this “moral issue” and so many different ways of portraying them in their art that generalizations and conclusions about this subject are happily impossible. But by the end of her study, TuSmith offers no surprises:

Contemporary ethnic literatures exhibit commonalities as well as differences concerning the issue of individualism and community in America. A prominent similarity among the works discussed is that all the writers present the individual within a communal context. Unlike Eurocentric literary heroes, the individual alone is never viewed as a model of success (p. 179).

"The essential conclusion of this study," says TuSmith, "is that ethnic literature does indeed offer an alternative discourse, a 'first language' of community rather than individualism" (p. 190).

In four of her six chapters, TuSmith features a female and a male writer from four ethnic American groups: Asian-American (Kingston and Chin), Chicano-/Chicana-American (Cisneros and Rivera), African-American (Walker and Wideman), and Native American (Silko and Momaday). In each of these chapters, she mentions three or four other writers in each group, quotes from writers on their own work, and often inserts the views of critics with whom she agrees or disagrees. Her opening chapter on "Ethnicity and Community" contains informative, up-to-date remarks on the meaning of various terms and phrases associated with ethnic literatures: *racial minorities*, *ethnics*, *ethnicity*, *race*, *immigrants*, and so forth. The strongest and most useful sections of TuSmith's book are close readings of certain individual works, including *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, and some incisive, though incidental, commentary on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

But whenever TuSmith tries to speak in larger terms, she gets in trouble. Her study cannot overcome the triteness of the individual-versus-community concept, a favorite of literature teachers since the beginning of time, probably because it can be applied so easily to every book ever written. That some ethnic American writers have important things to say about community is not news, nor is their skill at often devising innovative formal devices to express community values. In exploring the details of Abel's attempt to reconnect with his community in *House Made of Dawn* or Tayo's with his in *Ceremony*, TuSmith makes several intelligent observations that students of these novels may find useful. Had she concentrated exclusively on the specific details associated with similar attempts at community connection in the work of all eight authors she features, TuSmith's book would have far more authority than it does. At least she has read and studied those works carefully.

But her decision to take on what she repeatedly terms the "Eurocentric literary tradition" or "the hegemonic European American standard in literature," along with the "cult of individualism" or "patriarchal, capitalistic individualism," or the "ideology of individualism" in contemporary American society, as well as to generalize about the literature of four ethnic groups while reading only a fraction of the available texts, makes reading her book an often embarrassing experience. As the first line of this

review indicates, TuSmith seems aware of the problem. She frequently offers disclaimers such as “[W]e cannot analyze an occasional work of ethnic literature and expect it to be representative of an entire group” (p. 24) and then does exactly that. It will not do to claim that the “scope of a multicultural study must by its nature be wide-ranging” (p. ix) or to call her study pluralistic, as she does. TuSmith needs to read more. Otherwise, there is no avoiding her bland and commonplace conclusions (see above) about community in ethnic literature. Had she spent a few more years investigating the literatures of England, France, Spain, Greece, Germany, Italy, and Scandinavia, she might not so complacently and incessantly have trotted out phrases such as “Eurocentric bias” or mammoth generalizations such as the “Eurocentric penchant for polarities.”

In writing of Frank Chin’s *Year of the Dragon*, she is interesting—at times fascinating—about the speech patterns of the play and the “nine tones” that exist in Cantonese, but then, failing to resist the generalizing impulse and needing an enemy, she resorts to class notes from her undergraduate days: “[T]he brand of bourgeois individualism that is generally attributed to middle-class European Americans is inconceivable in this ethnic context” (p. 43). *House Made of Dawn* also “offers, in form as well as meaning, an alternative to the limitations of bourgeois individualism” (p. 113). In writing of Leslie Silko’s narrator, TuSmith claims that this “special teller-listener relationship, when translated into a literary framework, expands the parameters of fiction beyond the European American construct” (p. 123). Beyond it at last, thank God.

In the concluding chapter of *All My Relatives*, TuSmith surpasses herself by conducting a veritable symphony of Europhobic simplicities of particular interest to readers of this journal:

While it is not within the scope of this study to compare and contrast the two works, the connection between Silko’s and Momaday’s first novels needs to be stated. By Eurocentric literary standards Silko’s novels might be considered “unoriginal” and plagiaristic.² Within the Native American oral and literary traditions, however, the text is a part of the community so that modern Eurocentric concepts of originality are meaningless.

But footnote 2 hastens to add, “In my research I have not encountered any critic who directly addresses this issue. Perhaps the topic is taboo at the moment since critics suspect, but are unwilling to

confront, what might be considered the ultimate sin by post-Romantic Eurocentric literary standards."

Taboo? I know a whole bunch of Eurocentrics, including young ones who have read both books in my classes and noted the similarities between the two (is there a reader alive who hasn't?), but I have never heard them charge either book with unoriginality or the authors with plagiarism. Indeed, these same ECs are apt to regard both novels as highly original, while simultaneously recognizing the American Indian traditions within them.

TuSmith creates straw men and engages in phantom battles. When she says that *Ceremony* "can be viewed as an American writer's challenge to the cult of individualism in contemporary society" (p. 129), one sees her point even if one does not share her faith in the existence of that single "cult"; or when she writes of Abel that "he has incorporated positive tribal values into his individual consciousness" and "is an individual who belongs to a community" (p. 118), one understands perfectly. But her continual claim that "Eurocentric ways of approaching literature simply do not apply to ethnic American writers" (p. 147) is baffling, especially considering her own very traditional approaches in this book. Yes, one can locate, as TuSmith does, selected silly critical comments about a particular writer, but she needs to be reassured that most readers of the novels she examines are hardly imprisoned by Eurocentricity and are vastly more flexible, receptive, and open-minded than she seems to know.

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Always Getting Ready, Upterrlainarluta: Yup'ik Eskimo Subsistence in Southwest Alaska. Photographs by James H. Barker; text by James H. Barker. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1993. 144 pages. \$50.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

The photographs in James Barker's beautiful book on the contemporary subsistence-based culture of the Yup'ik Eskimo cluster into six groups, with text between the groups and a few photos interspersed in the text. The caption of each photograph gives the name or names of the people in the photo, the location, and a brief description of what is occurring. The six sections of photographs and texts are arranged by pairs of months. The Yup'ik month