



Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization

Ed. James E. Block and Amanda J. Haste (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015).

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Review by Shelby Shapiro, first published in

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Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization consists of sixteen essays in four Parts crossing borders, disciplines and methodologies. The essays represent a mixed bag in terms of quality and insight, most of the exemplary papers being in Parts II ("Embracing Hybridity") and III ("The Challenges of Assimilation").

Throughout the book, authors invoke the concept of "post-modernism." That we live in a post-modern world is a taken-for-granted assumption by many of the writers. But are we truly living in a post-modern age or, as social theorist Anthony Giddens maintains, in a period of late modernity? What does being a "post-modern" individual mean? At no point do authors present specific examples of such beings. Monica Colt, for example, in "Cultural Values and Identity Formation in M. G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*," uses the phrase in her very first sentence, after which it thankfully drops from sight as she examines a novel about an author born in India who moves first to Canada and then to the United States. Nowhere do the authors present examples of people who are fragmented, decentered or deconstructed, the usual terms used when discussing post-modernism.

A particularly interesting piece is Lelania Sperrazza's "Arabizi: From Techno-lution to Revolution," which deals with the phenomenon of an identity developed through language fusion and the Internet. Arabizi combines Arabic and English, the language of the Internet, as it has developed into a mode of communication for Egyptian youth, coming into its

own with the Egyptian Revolution which mobilized tech-savvy young people. Although Sperrazza does not make this comparison, the same process has occurred elsewhere, for example the development of "Yeshvish" among ultra-Orthodox Jews, a fusion of Yiddish, Hebrew and English used by those going to Yeshivas in the United States.

Efrat Sadras-Ron's interesting paper, "Ethnicity as a New Model for Jewish Identities: The Case of Cuban-Jewish Identity," would have benefited from casting a wider historical, cultural or global net. Jewishness as a form of ethnicity exists in the United States, Canada, and had roots in Eastern and Central Europe before and after World Wars I and II. Sadras-Ron rightly posits learning Hebrew as a linguistic glue, but misses Cuba's rich Yiddish cultural life before and after Fidel Castro. For example, *Der Onheib [The Beginning]*¹ contained a number of articles discussing Yiddish life in Cuba, and in November 1993 reproduced the title page of a journal entitled *Kuba-yisrael* [Cuba-Israel], with the flags and symbols of both countries.² Another useful addition would have been Robert M. Levine's *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba* (1993); using these authors would have added considerable heft and weft to an interesting article.

¹ The publication of the Coordinating Committee of Yiddish Culture Clubs in Miami Florida.

² *Der Onheib's* founder, Osher (Khaim/Jaime) Schuchinsky (1907-1995) emigrated from Poland to Cuba in 1926 at age 19; in 1961, he made his final migration, to the United States; while in Cuba he wrote for a Yiddish newspaper, *Havener Leben* (Havana Life). Schuchinsky's writings concern his "three homelands": Poland, Cuba and the United States.

One of the most fascinating papers is "A Third Gender? Expression of Gender Identity in Celibate Monasticism through Words and Music," by musicologist Amanda J. Haste. Examining the music composed and played by monks and nuns in Anglican, Episcopalian and Roman Catholic institutions in the United States, Great Britain and Canada, she convincingly demonstrates how gender impacts on the music of the Religious. This is an extremely nuanced, well-researched and jargon-free piece of research, brimming with fresh insights.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for Ankita Haldar's "Feminine Self-Fashioning through Culinary Fiction: A Reading of Priva Basil's *Ishq and Mushq* [Love and Smell]," with sentences such as "In her work 'Towards a Feminist Narratology' (1997) Susan Lanser has advocated the need for a review of the narratology form: although feminine experiences have been narrated before, the tradition of "Female Narratology", supposedly rooted in mimesis, has gradually developed a semiotic interpretation which has been gaining ground, and it can be noted that there is often a heavy reliance on culinary tropes to express this need." (177) Haldar's view of women shifts from the perception of ages past—"the Feminine Form Divine"—to the following: "A woman's body, sexuality and her biological difference bestow uniqueness to her, and also shape her identity as she becomes a secreting, smelling, discharging, oozing, bleeding, lactating and procreative individual, to a greater extent than the male." (175-176) She also refers to "the kinds of tropes being used in fiction oozing out of the South Asian diaspora by means of some of its contemporary female members . . ." (178): as far as this reviewer is concerned, not only do the women ooze, but apparently their fiction does as well.

Syed Rizvi's "Group Cohesion and Assimilation: Ethnic Trust Networks and Global Economic Pressures" on how ethnic entrepreneurs raise capital deepens our understanding of ethnic economic niches, shifts the focus of the collection from groups in the U.S. to those in the U.K., and is likewise well constructed. Rizvi offers insights into the value systems and trust networks of several generations of British immigrant

communities whose origins lie in the Indian subcontinent. This essay is well worth reading.

On balance, this book is well worth buying, especially for the papers in Parts II and III. The range of topics is wide: in addition to those already mentioned, Brendan Woicke examines the impact of students studying abroad in terms of their self-identification—an extension of the rootlessness/adopted roots among people such as Franz Fanon—while Frances Pheasant-Kelly draws parallels between the film *Avatar* and post-9/11 American politics. Some of the remaining essays concern identity issues expressed through literary pieces, from African women's literature to Indian poetry, so this book offers a wide range of variations on the theme of identity. There is a thematic index, and careful NCIS readers will note that the author list contains several independent scholars.

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