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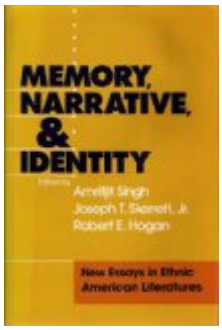

Amritjit Singh, Joseph Skerrett, Robert E. Hogan, eds.. *Memory, Narrative and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures.* Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 1994. ix + 349 pp. $50.00, library, ISBN 978-1-55553-203-1.

Reviewed by Peter Powers

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Our past is a problem. Or, more precisely, our sense of continuity with the past is a problem that affects everything from the our ability to develop a coherent politics to our ability to develop a coherent sense of communal or personal identity. Scholars and writers as diverse in time and circumstance as Simone Weil, Cynthia Ozick, Michael Kammen, and George Lipsitz have explored this "crisis of memory" as a salient feature of twentieth-century life, a crisis that has been exacerbated by the development of a consumer society wherein memory, like everything else, is commodified.

This new collection edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph Skerrett, and Robert Hogan is a valuable addition to our understanding of the crisis of memory and the responses to it that ethnic writers have employed. Ranging across Jewish, Chinese, African, and other American literatures, the essays here make a convincing case that, while dominant cultural practices have worked to erase the memory of difference that ethnic groups embody, ethnic writers have found a number of creative ways to employ narrative as "an act of cultural recovery" (p. 19), an act that need not be either simplistically nostalgic or romantic, and may indeed act as a powerful cultural intervention. As Terry DeHay puts it in his theoretical overview,

If marginalized cultures accept the dominant culture's narratives as normative, they will be powerless to resist domination. if, instead, they denaturalize these narratives, at the same time recuperating their own collective (recessive memories), they can provide alternative "collective authorities," with alternative (emergent) modes of action" to resist domination (p. 30).

DeHay's essay serves an excellent introduction to the theoretical issues surrounding memory and narrative that the other writers take up in more detailed close readings of specific authors or periods. Indeed, Dehay's essay and the editors' detailed introduction stand as useful introductions to the field of ethnic literature, its history and the variety of its cultural concerns.

The essays that follow are consistently well-written and insightful, though, as with any collection, the reader's knowledge of the various ethnic literatures of the United States will determine the

usefulness of individual essays. Two of the best are Sharon Jessee's "Time and the Marvelous in Toni Morrison's ***Beloved***," and "Maxine Hong Kingston's Fake Books" by Debra Shostak. The essays show the variety of approaches in the collection, as Jessee connects Morrison's views of time to African religions, while Shostak is concerned with the way in which oral tradition affects Kingston's view of the narrative self in ***The Trip Master Monkey***.

Scholars of popular culture may be most drawn to Betty Bergland's reading of the use of photographs in Mary Antin's ***The Promised Land***, or to Angelita Reyes' study of carnival as a central motif in the work of Paule Marshall. Both writers draw on significant sources from the study of popular culture, including George Lipsitz's ***Time Passages*** and the collection of essays on photography edited by Victor Burgin, ***Thinking Photography***. Even without a detailed knowedge of either Antin or Marshall, readers should find these essays enlightening in their application of theories of photography and carnival narrative.

Strong overviews, wide-ranging approaches and concerns, insightful and well-written essays: This collection should stand as a good resource for students of ethnicity and American culture generally for some time to come.