

Paula M.L.

Learning from experience: Minority identities, multicultural struggles

BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2004

*Reviewed by Rosaura Sánchez*

ISBN: 0520230140

Moya's theoretically grounded and innovative work examines a variety of cultural and theoretical texts that either engage with or fail to consider the epistemic link between identity and social location as mediated by experience.

Over the last two decades, "identity politics" has been much debated and attacked within U.S. academic and political domains. While neo-conservatives deny the need for ethnic/racial identification and would eliminate it as an official category (this, on the false premise of a color-blind society), others, primarily postmodernists, dismiss "identity" as essentialist, naive and retrograde. At issue in these debates is whether "identity"—viewed as historically contingent and socially/discursively constructed—can be a "meaningful" or even politically viable category. Can an emphasis on particularity be anything but divisive and a negation of any notion of universality?

Any discussion of "identity" today has to confront the pervasive relativism and cynicism in this society. The dismissive attitude of contemporary theorists, often antifoundationalist in orientation and ever ready to point to the discursive nature of all knowledge, is not, however, an option for those of us subject to subordinating types of identification; for us "identity"—be it class, ethnic, racial, gender or sexual identity—is not so much a choice as an oppositional response. Clearly "identity" is always contestatory in nature, emerging within social and political conditions that require its constitution. Its historical contingency implies that identity is transient, but its transitoriness does not negate its historical validity and significance. Consequently, identities are telling historical indicators that allow for an analysis of the relation between social/political reality and the discursive realm. What's important is that one not reduce "reality" to one's knowledge of it. It is this critically grounded reclaiming of "reality" and "identity" from what is termed a "postpositivist realist" perspective that is central to Moya's *Learning from Experience* and that makes its challenge of trendy postmodernist notions about identity especially provocative.

Moya's "postpositivist" realist approach engages constructivist theory in that it acknowledges that knowledge is theory-mediated, that is, discursively constructed and historically contingent. But this approach moves beyond a relativist position by positing a rethinking of the idea of objectivity. For Moya, objectivity is "an ideal of inquiry necessarily involving theoretical bias and interest" (14); it is this "theory-mediated objective knowledge" produced precisely by particular types of experience that she proposes to consider. She sets out, then, not to find a "truth" behind certain experiences and identities, but to test, with all the uncertainty that this type of analysis implies, a number of hypotheses and truth claims in particular accounts of reality. The reality that concerns her is that of Chicanas/os and other marginalized people, whose work and lived experiences are configured as epistemically productive.

Moya's theoretically grounded and innovative work examines a variety of cultural and theoretical texts that either engage with or fail to consider the epistemic link between identity and social location as mediated by experience. *Learning From Experience* is divided into five chapters and an Introduction that establishes her theoretical approach and contextualizes the academic debate within which the work has been generated. While the theoretical component is central to her work, Moya also explores at length the practical or political aspects of identity and experience, especially in her incisive discussion of contemporary neoconservative perspectives on assimilation and in her proposal for a particular type of multicultural education.

Moya, an Associate Professor in English at Stanford University, enters the debate on identity by specifically questioning the analytical underpinnings of postmodernist assessments of identity as strictly performative, variable, and differential. This theoretical discussion is key to Chapter One, "Postmodernism, Realism, and the Politics of Identity: Cherrie Moraga and Chicana Feminism." Here she discusses the work of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, critics whose poststructuralist/postmodernist work skirts the connection between social location and identity or knowledge. This failure to link discursive subversion of difference to material transformations leads Moya to argue that

[a] politics of discourse that does not provide for some sort of bodily or concrete action outside the realm of the academic text will forever be inadequate to change the difficult reality of our lives. (36)

Moya also contrasts these two critics's misreading of Moraga's work with her own postpositivist realist assessment of Moraga's third world feminist political project; here she stresses that an analysis of Moraga's "theory in the flesh" requires that one take into account her racial/cultural background and experience. Moya suggests that while in and of itself experience may not be epistemically sufficient, it is epistemically indispensable for explaining particular social relations. What matters, in the final analysis, is the explanatory adequacy of the theoretical framework that one uses to interpret one's experience; this interrogation of one's analytical framework emerges when it is out of sync with one's concrete social location.

In Chapter Two, "Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory," Moya provides a critical and cogent examination of two key Chicana feminist critics (Chela Sandoval and Norma Alarcón). Her writing style here as elsewhere is clear and succinct and is a pleasure to read; her discussions are not weighed down with unnecessary jargon, as is so often the case in much of recent scholarship. In this chapter, Moya builds on what she posits in the previous chapter, that is, that a postpositivist realist theoretical approach would better serve to analyze and theorize the situation of contemporary Chicanas. After reviewing recent feminist concerns with respect to postmodernist analyses of gender and questioning the adequacy of a strictly pragmatist feminist theory, Moya argues for establishing ethical and political goals "based on reliable, objective knowledge of ourselves and our world" (60). In her critique of Alarcón and Sandoval she suggests that both critics's postmodernist framework fails fully to explain the ties between social location, experience and identity. Moya's alternative theoretical framework is discussed in terms of its explanatory capacity to account for *both* discursive and nondiscursive domains. While stressing the need to link concrete social constructions to specific structural locations, she does not remain within the realm of particularity. Her work advocates a new notion of the universal

that is emancipatory for all humanity, a formulation that does not reject cultural particularity. This reconstructed notion of the human universal is also taken up in Chapter Three, "Cultural Particularity vs. Universal Humanity: The Value of Being Asimilao," in which she offers an analysis of the identity politics of neoconservative minorities that she attributes to their self-reflection on their social location.

From an analysis of particular theorists and writers, Moya moves on to the pedagogical implications in her theoretical proposal. Chapter Four, "Learning How to Learn From Others: Realist Proposals for Multicultural Education," examines ongoing debates over multiculturalism and multicultural education. Here she proposes eight postpositivist realist principles that "should be central to the pedagogical practice of educators and researchers who are interested in promoting a truly democratic and culturally diverse society" (158). In formulations that link culture to experience, knowledge, and identity formation and that acknowledge the creative and destructive potential attendant to difference and conflict, Moya offers insights for new pedagogical strategies and methodologies.

It is the last chapter of *Learning from Experience* dealing with Viramontes's novel that most strikingly reveals Moya's dexterity in productively bringing together her theoretical framework with a critical realist reading of literature. In "Reading as a Realist: Expanded Literacy in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*," Moya provides a nuanced analysis of the novel that makes a compelling case for the need to foreground "the material aspects of the interpretive process," as she proceeds to explore the work's conceptualization of literacy as "a materialist engagement with the world." Using the narrative device of focalization to disarticulate the various narrative perspectives in the novel, Moya deftly shows how social location and social ideologies are inextricably related to the characters' identities and to their knowledge of the world. More specifically, in tracing the main character's coming to consciousness and her acquisition of verbal strategies to read her social world, Moya suggests that literacy functions in the novel not only as a "skill involving a human agent's total engagement with the world," but also as a heuristic procedure that enables the character to gauge the adequacy of her readings and perspectives. This final chapter in effect simultaneously puts into practice and provides a synopsis of the postpositivist realist framework laid out in the previous chapters.

Moya's work provides a theoretically sophisticated and analytically discerning assessment of the significance of "identity" in contemporary U.S. society. It is a work that does not see emancipation as a discredited notion nor does it lose its critical bearings amidst the plethora of circulating notions of hybridity or difference. Nor are the local and particular seen to be antagonistic to the universal. And last but not least, Moya's work convincingly reclaims reality and posits identity as epistemically productive and, most importantly, potentially liberating.

**Rosaura Sánchez** teaches in the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of *Chicano Discourse and Telling Identities*, and, with Beatrice Pita, she has recently published *Conflicts of Interest: The letters of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton* as well as co-edited the re-publication of Ruiz de Burton's novels *The Squatter and the Don* and *Who Would Have Thought It?* Her fiction has also been published in a bilingual collection *He Walked in and Sat Down*.