

*Comparative Literature and  
the Origins of World Literature  
in National Literatures*

World Literature actually traces its origin back to English Departments and the revision of the American Literature canon in the 1980's. But, even before then, its conceptual roots can be found in Black Studies and Women's Studies Programs that came into existence in the US in the 70's and were devised to represent the experience and cultural production of then underrepresented Blacks and women in academe. The addition to the curriculum of texts written by Blacks and women closely followed administrative efforts to diversify the faculty under the mandate of Affirmative Action. Over time, the recruitment of underrepresented groups expanded to include other minorities (such as Hispanics and Native-Americans) and hyphenated ethnicities (such as Asian-Americans). Such diversity initiatives coincided with English Departments' attempts to revamp their curriculum. These two separate events – diversifying the canon as well as the university community – resulted in the formation and implementation of a broad range of courses dealing with issues of identity that came to be popularly known as multiculturalism. These new courses were supported by a theoretical superstructure devised to justify their existence.

Multiculturalism was, therefore, institutionalized in American academe from its inception as a bureaucratic structure purporting to foster minority rights. Ideally, it sought to facilitate dead white authors being supplanted in the canon by authors from underrepresented groups and dead-wood white male professors being supplanted in the classroom by women and minorities. Multiculturalism thus claimed to re-envision the world from a decolonizing and anti-racist perspective. It should also be noted that the growth of multiculturalism signaled a concerted effort on the part of English Departments to appear more relevant and make their students more marketable. As I have shown elsewhere (Figueira 2008), around this time English Departments were also co-opting the teaching of continental theory from the smaller and more vulnerable Comparative Literature Departments. All these developments had very pragmatic aims. There had been a general down-sizing in the humanities. It was becoming more and more difficult for English students to find viable topics of disserta-

tions and for English Departments to place their job candidates in a nearly glutted market. English Departments were responding to the growing influence of the corporate management model. If English PhDs could also claim expertise in continental theory, American minority literature and even, world literature written in or translated into English, their employment possibilities would increase exponentially. Just as the theory craze in America had allowed English Departments to colonize theory, now Identity Studies and multiculturalism were enabling them to co-opt the ethnic other.

Then postcolonial criticism emerged in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and the dismantling of Cold War-era Area Studies programs. This new offshoot of Identity Studies sought to examine the state of having been (or being) colonized and the problem of how to live with that condition. As in the case of multiculturalism, postcolonial criticism also purported to engage the other. With a limited body of texts, postcolonial criticism claimed to offer a broad critique of the history of Western hegemony over its others by revealing the discourse that informed the West's assumption of cultural superiority. Just like identity studies and multiculturalism before it, postcolonial criticism presumed to offer a reading of previously unstudied texts and authors, an oppositional examination of canonical authors, and an alternative literary history. It also asserted that there was a body of postcolonial texts that shared a common project and differed from canonical literature in narrative structure and political, economic, and cultural concerns. Also, like multiculturalism and Identity Studies, postcolonial criticism claimed to focus on the lives and struggles of the oppressed. In the case of postcolonial criticism, the oppressed consisted of colonized authors writing in English. In its initial articulation, postcolonial criticism had a tenuous relationship with Comparative Literature and other national literatures, since it developed primarily from domestic multiculturalism and discovered the Third World only through the optic of the critique of Orientalism. Nevertheless, it took great pride in its supposed democratizing and non-discriminatory project. Like multiculturalism, it too served the very practical purpose of opening up the sclerotic field of English Literature and colonizing areas of study previously housed in Comparative Literature. Despite its highly-touted liberating agenda, postcolonial studies shared multiculturalism's pragmatism. It also claimed to offer a new and cutting edge theory and champion the deemed under-represented masses. I say "deemed" because, contrary to what English Departments and narrowly focused comparatists might assert, there did exist and there continues to exist in ever increasing numbers, comparatists working with Asian and

African languages and literatures. In fact, these areas of studies could even be found in university curricula well before English Departments and Postcolonial Studies discovered their existence!

Essentialism thus beset discussions of postcolonial criticism from the beginning. What could be included under its rubric quickly expanded to the degree that any society, it seemed, could be labeled postcolonial. In other words, the term “postcolonial” became over-determined so quickly that it was rendered meaningless. Even though postcolonial critics pretend to engage the special and distinctive regional characteristics of the cultures and literatures under investigation, more often than not, their analyses revealed little cultural and historical specificity. While postcolonial critics might claim acuity with regard to the intricacies of their readings (Sunder Rajan 1997: 603–5), they were, in fact, often ignorant of key cultural signifiers in the narratives they sought to deconstruct. These mistakes, which led to gross distortions, were often not even acknowledged because overriding importance was assigned to the act of critical theorizing. Although postcolonial critics claimed to focus on the role of language in the dissemination of colonial ideologies, their ignorance of the colonized’s linguistic context limited their scope. The postcolonial archive, as opposed to the limitless texts available to the comparatist, ultimately consisted of a handful of endlessly recycled articles by a small group of theorists and a discrete body of published texts in English. Over time, texts in French were added to this corpus, once Romance Language Departments realized the boon of this new critical trend. Practitioners of postcolonial criticism never really questioned that these two languages of empire did not represent the totality of what could be termed the postcolonial experience.

Postcolonial theory justified its reliance on the master’s language by insisting that it was there alone that hybrid subjectivity was situated. Postcolonial critics not only lacked knowledge of indigenous languages, which would have been required of a comparatist doing such cross-cultural work, but they also tended to ignore those texts, vernacular or not, that did not fit the discourse of oppression promoted by their brand of theory. In fact, one of the key theorists, Gayatri Spivak, devised a theory of subaltern voicelessness to license the neglect of material that contradicted the master narrative of this criticism. In short, the scope of postcolonial criticism differed radically from that of Comparative Literature: It lacked Comparative Literature’s linguistic competency and its willingness to engage alternative theoretical and discursive approaches. With its closed and rigid system, postcolonial criticism could even be said to mimic colonial thinking. While it claimed to problematize the

binaries of Western historicism, it still ordered the globe according to the colonial and the postcolonial (McClintock 1992: 86), the colonized and the colonizer. In postcolonial theory's reliance on this binary logic, the very oppositional structure that it claimed to dismantle, there was little room for cosmopolitan and ambivalent voices to surface. One colonial experience came to resemble another. Relying exclusively on the experience of modern colonialism, the postcolonial critic divided history into manageable and isolated segments, while at the same time arguing against the false homogenization of orientalist projects (Bahri 1995: 52). A-contextual and fragmentary analyses were accepted in postcolonial criticism out of a deep cynicism regarding the other as a fossilized object of clinical experimentation.

Just as multiculturalism could bring Native-American Studies onto campuses as a "polite pseudo – intellectual vehicle to provide the appearance of ethnic diversity," so too could postcolonial criticism teach the cultural production of Asia and Africa in a diluted and uninformed manner in order to validate the insights and conclusions of Euro-American academia (Guerrero 1996: 56). But, as opposed to the potential investigation that these literatures might undergo in the comparative literature context, with care given to their languages and contextual anthropological, religious or historical understanding of non-Western cultures, postcolonial criticism's avowed project offered no alternative to Euro-centrism and its institutions. It only delivered a partial and watered-down vision compared to the cultural and linguistic specificity of Comparative Literature. While in theory it claimed to deliver the putative end of meta-narratives, in actuality, it led us down a one-way street, with Anglo/Francophone culture as the one recognizing the (often) non-white culture. Institutionalizing the study of otherness in such a format promoted assimilation with domesticating egalitarian demands attached. Postcolonial criticism's methodology thus obscured issues of power and privilege. Although it sought to uncover occluded and submerged identities and to liberate the oppressed, postcolonial criticism never really challenged structures of power. Rather, it promoted an ethos of recognition that did not question Euro-American definitions of knowledge. Like multiculturalism before it, postcolonial criticism ultimately delivered stasis and consolidated control. Class divisions and systemic inequalities remain intact. In both multiculturalism and postcolonial criticism, the non-white culture must seek legitimacy and recognition from white culture in order "to be" or "speak out." Non-white or non-Western culture must use the languages of white Western culture to produce itself (Rizvi

1994: 63). The same criticisms can be leveled against the new formulation of World Literature.

These American attempts to liberalize the canon by the simple addition of minority or non-Western literature betoken tokenization (Pratt 1994: 59; Chow 2002: 113). What all these Western-based champions of the other do not wish to admit is the following: If non-white materials are perceived as “add-ons” to White structures, they never address the centrality and dominance of the latter or the institutional and structural determinants of inequality (Gordon and Newfield 1996: 79, 87). In fact, multiculturalism, postcolonial criticism and now, World Literature can even be said to feed American monolingual arrogance and cultural isolationism, despite their avowed liberal (and liberatory) agenda. It is this larger political project, the “prematurely congratulatory” (McClintock 1992: 87) stance and promise to speak in terms of intervention and resistance, that most distinguish these pedagogies from Comparative Literature.

Our discipline has no such defining mission, even though it regularly uses theoretical approaches that individually might claim to engage in a political or social process of reform.

The myth of effective scholarly engagement invaded literary studies decades ago. Each new theoretical school claims to offer an exceptionally true or valid methodology. In other words, theory is no longer just a tool for reading, but a means of unveiling some heritage of systems that limits the reader. Many literary critics sincerely believe that our present condition, although seemingly benign, imposes an existential limit and theory alone can liberate us from systemic and violent constraints (Fluck 1996: 216). This politicization of theory has impacted negatively on how we approach literature, study and compare it. It has introduced an element of dogmatism into Comparative Literature that was previously absent from the field. In the process, the text has receded from view and critics have assumed new prominence without having to interrogate their positionality. In the various pedagogies of alterity that have arisen in the past thirty years, there are few attempts to question how a text’s appearance as a network of hegemonic or subversive gestures suits the state of literary theoretical professionalism (even though Spivak pretends to do so). Very few have speculated how theory allows critics, who are cut off from any effective social action and buoyed by their security as academic professionals, can claim solidarity with the disenfranchised. At work here is the pretense that academic criticism can function as a political act and “textual culture” can displace “activist culture” (Ahmad 1992: 1). The critic’s location and theory’s

master narrative of oppression have become overarching, eclipsing the very historical situation and exegetical context that a comparative analysis champions.

Rather than studying and comparing cultures on their own terms, as is the practice of comparative literature, the American academic study of the other has focused on recognition, tolerance and the acknowledgement of victimhood. The sense of empathy has always been an operant factor in Identity Studies, since their inception. It was then carried over beyond Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies into more recently theorized forms such as Queer Studies, White Male Studies, and Fat Studies, etc. In these sub-disciplines, there are seldom any texts even involved in analysis, just some theoretical articles. On the rare occasion when there is a text involved, one looks less at the actual text and more at the critics' experience of the text in terms of their subjectivity (as Queer, White, Fat, etc.). So, in opposition to Comparative Literature – where the texts being compared still count for something – in such sub-categories of Identity Studies, or rather Victim Studies, literary criticism need no longer even talk about cultural products, but rather critics can talk *ad nauseum* about themselves. The critic can, in fact, become the text. Self-referentiality had always been present in theory and certain critics have taken this tendency to new heights. But now it seems often to be the main point of discussion. In the United States, multiculturalism often focused on the domestic level, by analyzing those others who had sought assimilation into American culture. It ignored the other beyond our shores. Postcolonialism and World Literature claim to study this other other.

In conclusion, Postcolonial Studies never sought to exist within Comparative Literature as a sub-specialty or even to co-exist with Comparative Literature. Rather it sought to supplant it, as Spivak made abundantly clear in the *Death of a Discipline*. While World Literature does not overtly claim to want to replace Comparative Literature, it certainly seeks to reform it. David Damrosch actually presents World Literature as a means of democratizing Comparative Literature, making it a less elitist discipline where students in lesser institutions with fewer opportunities to learn foreign languages can still study literature in a global perspective (Damrosch 2011). This is an odd stance. It acknowledges the “dumbing” down of the US curriculum, its disinterest in language learning and the general erosion of the humanities. Rather than promote a reform process that counters these trends, World Literature proudly chooses to universalize them. There are those who see nothing new in World Literature, just a reinvention of the wheel, a reformulation of the old rubric of

“General Literature” or a retreat of the old Area Studies concentration, the Cold-War Pentagon construct for managing the Second and Third Worlds. The bottom line is this: All the pedagogies of alterity, whether they are formulated as multiculturalism, postcolonial criticism or now, World Literature promote the ignorance of foreign languages and literary canons that extend beyond American anthologies. They encourage us to consume the other on the cheap as leveled out groups or populations studied exclusively in the languages of empire and according to Western episthemes. All these pedagogies share messianic claims to recognize the contributions of neglected groups and offer a reform project heralding diversity and promoting a progressive politics. In actuality, they only honor difference on a superficial level and implement a co-optive strategy of canon revision as an ethos of recognition. They treat underrepresented literatures in English or English translation as add-ons with little care given to problematizing the Euro-Amero-centric perspective of their project or its definitions of knowledge. When a comparatist approaches the same literatures, he/she is expected to enter into the target culture, learn its languages and histories, study it on its own terms as distinctive enough to compare and contrast with other internal and external cultures and their products. The foreign culture exists in its own right, not as a construct molded to suit the corporate university, large publishing conglomerates and a consumer-savvy professoriate.

Despite such limitations, postcolonial criticism has nevertheless proven to be quite significant for future literary studies. It has set the standard for how little we can expect from literary engagement with the other in the age of globalization. All postcolonial critical readings reach the same conclusion: they expose the existence of unequal distribution of power, the underrepresentation and marginalization of certain groups, the theorizing of orientalist representation, and the claim to deconstruct repressive metaphysical modes of thought (Lopez and Marzec 2010: 677). Yet, in the thirty years that postcolonial critics have been reaching these conclusions, these insights have effected no change and liberated no one. Even the prefix of the term, its status as “post” speaks from the safely theorizable future and signifies nothing more than a history of deferral, not its vaunted claim of action at the site of repression (ib.). The important thing about postcolonial criticism is that, like all new “isms,” it has quickly run its course, not before making quite a few careers and opening up some employment opportunities for monolingualists and elites from the Third World. It has already been eclipsed by the new initiative of World Literature, a field that is just as anti-imperialistic as Postcolonial Studies and

more palatable to administrators. Like multiculturalism and postcolonialism, now World Literature can step in and co-opt Comparative Literature without having to do its onerous legwork. For all its talk of centrifugal and centripetal spheres of influence, World Literature is nothing more than the next generation of a consumerist pedagogy for managing the other in a monolingual context by the First World scholars and their native informants. World Literature has become the new site for viable political posturing, even if what it does is nothing more than what Comparative Literature does without subtitles.

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