

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: CAN THIS MARRIAGE BE SAVED?¹

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RESUMO: Apresentação do que os comparatistas fazem nos Estados Unidos, em resposta à pergunta que motivou este volume: “O que fazem os comparatistas ao redor do mundo?”

PALAVRAS CHAVES: Literatura Comparada; EUA

ABSTRACT: Presentation of “What Comparatists do in the United States,” in response to the question that motivated the issue: “What do Comparatists around the world do?”

KEY WORDS: Comparative Literature; USA

Let me start this essay with a disclaimer. I loved Comparative Literature (CL). It was a late blooming romance. I did not even know CL existed. I wanted to study a number of things, religion, myths, anthropology, folklore, French literature, the Classics, Indian philosophy, etc. I had not felt fully at home in these places. Then some bureaucrat at the University of Chicago thought I might be a comparatist. It was love at first sight. What entranced me was, unlike so many other fields, CL was neither dogmatic nor exclusionary. One could really do whatever one wanted as long as one did it seriously. In the 80's, CL was the place to go to be your own person.

Because I was slightly more mature, I approached this relationship in a discriminating manner. I had known other loves and tried to keep a level head about me with this new romance. I particularly kept my eyes open for any hint of betrayal. And indeed, as time went on, the initial infatuation dwindled as CL flirted unabashedly with so many theories. But, I must admit that my love for CL never abated. Over the years, I have learned to tolerate CL's dalliances with other disciplines and have even resolved, despite of all the infidelities, never to divorce CL. For one thing, I am a Catholic and it is too late for an annulment. Besides CL has yet to exhibit those “irreconcilable” differences that warrant a definitive separation. But CL has strayed in its affections so many times and its flirtations have become so excessive that I have begun to wonder whether this relationship can really be saved. In the following pages, I hope to outline just how CL has strayed and why.

A paradigm shift in literary studies from the aesthetic to the political occurred in the final decades of the last century, in part due to a radicalization of theory. At some point in time in the late 70's, one began to view literature as an outmoded form of cultural capital belonging to the

¹ Portions of this paper will appear in Tomiche, Anne, ed. *Comparative Literature as a Critical Approach/ La littérature compare comme approche critique*, Paris: Garnier, forthcoming.

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bourgeoisie. An important stage in this process of radicalization involved the rejection of the canon of dead white males in favor of what one might term the cultural studies model. It soon became apparent that dismantling the canon often had less to do with installing a more immediate and less conservative hierarchical format and more to do with establishing a new authority, grounded in identifying with and marketing marginalized populations. In the case of American universities, these commodity populations were packaged and marketed first under the rubric of identity studies, then under the rubric of multiculturalism, and finally under the umbrella of postcolonial literatures. They are now marketed as American World Literature. In order to situate these trends and clarify the political issues involved, we must begin our investigation with this transition from literary analysis to identity studies.

The early 70s in the States saw the emergence of Black Studies and Women's Studies programs, devised to represent the experience and cultural production of then underrepresented blacks and women in academia. One important thing to note is that these programs were usually staffed with African-Americans and women, respectively. The representation of underrepresented groups expanded over time to include other minorities (Hispanic, Native-American) and hyphenated ethnicities (Asian-Americans). Identity Studies was thus born as a discipline. It was subsequently institutionalized as multiculturalism (MC) and was supported by a theoretical superstructure devised to justify its inclusion. MC thus entered the curriculum in the United States as a bureaucratic structure purporting to foster minority rights. It was marketed as an outgrowth of the movement on American campuses to revamp the canon. It claimed to open the canon and the university up to subalterns, exiles, and others. Ideally, it sought to facilitate canonical (i.e. dead white male authors) being supplanted in the curricula by authors from underrepresented groups (writing in English). As a corollary benefit, dead-wood white male professors would ideally be supplanted by women and minorities in the classroom. This latter goal succeeded in the hiring of a significant number of white women. It succeeded to an incredibly lesser degree in the recruitment of traditional American minorities. Nevertheless, MC claimed success in re-envisioning the world from a decolonizing and anti-racist perspective.

Although MC theoretically claimed to attack Euro-centrism, a number of critics were not convinced. Some found it questionable that MC assumed that "certain people" might do well in academia studying themselves rather than studying cultures that were not their own "heritage", or working in fields where they were truly under-represented (such as the hard sciences). By encouraging minority students to study themselves, MC was seen by some as contributing to the further balkanization of minorities in American universities, a process that, since the inception of Affirmative Action in the 1970s, was well under way. Minorities could enter American¹ academia, but were managed, that is, directed toward fields that showcased their ethnicity, so universities could use one minority placement to make two political statements. Universities could show their commitment both to diversity hiring as well as flaunt their promotion of minority studies² Although some multiculturalists who in theory saw themselves as "border-crossers or even cultural workers³", in practice defined "alterity" in quite narrow terms. Minorities should enter only if they knew their place and could be showcased.

As it was practiced in American institutions, MC presupposed two basic ideas. First, it

¹ Throughout this essay, I use the term "American" to denote the US experience of these trends.

² In fact, you could be considered uppity as a minority if you dared to specialize in something you were not genetically predisposed to find interesting! How many times was I asked during job interviews if my specialization was liberation theology, rather than Hinduism, just because the interviewer could not pronounce my name!

³ Henry A. Giroux, "Post-Colonial Ruptures and Democratic Possibilities: Multiculturalism as an Anti-Racist Pedagogy", *Cultural Critique*, 1992, p. 5-39.

recognized that American history is not solely reflected in the activities of one race (white), one language group (English), one ethnicity (Anglo-Saxon) or one religion (Christianity). It quite correctly claimed that African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Native-Americans and others made central contributions to American culture. In most institutions, it did not act on this presupposition by contextualizing the American ethnic experience within the source culture in any substantive manner. Acknowledging difference was all that mattered. Actually learning about the different source languages or cultures was not necessary because MC took for granted that beneath the differences among Americans were some underlying principles and values that brought us together. American MC, as a theory of diversity, presupposed and required the notion of the assimilationist “common” culture and fostered a social order founded on the principle of unity in multiplicity¹. It revised the image of the US as a melting pot into America as a salad that is now not only colorful and beautiful, but more easily consumable. This transformation begs the question: “Who was the intended consumer²?”

The institutionalization of MC within US academia replicates that of corporate-level structures, since universities are also corporations³. We can, therefore, compare multicultural educational practices to corporate diversity management initiatives that derive from the assumption that racially and ethnically diverse groups need to be controlled in ways to contain conflict and fortify power relations⁴. The corporate model of disciplining diversity as a strategy for more control of workers⁵ does not attempt to assimilate diversity into the dominant culture. Rather, it digests unassimilated diversity with the same results as if homogeneity prevailed. The control problem with this model is that the cultures of MC are not the same and cannot be so easily consumed by the dominant white culture. So substitutions to the menu did not really work: Africans are not really the same as African-Americans. Indians cannot be swapped out for Mexicans. Yet, despite its ill-informed leveling out of difference,⁶ MC purported to offer representation of neglected groups when in fact it merely provided the illusion of some liberal reform that did not, in fact, exist.

As in the case of MC, postcolonialism (PC) also claimed to engage the Other. It shared with MC many of the same deficiencies and brought its own set of critical problems. PC seemed to be more concerned with the location of the theorist than the location of the term “postcoloniality”,⁷ its a-historicity, and its universalizing deployments⁸. Somehow, claiming that postcolonial criticism “covers all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization

¹ Epiphany San Juan, *Hegemony and Strategies of Transgression: Essays in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 223.

² Angela Y. Davis, “Gender, Class, Multiculturalism”, in Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds., *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 45.

³ Wahneema Lubiano, “Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor: Multiculturalism and State Narratives”, in Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds., *Mapping Multiculturalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴ In fact, David Rieff has argued, the treasured catchphrases of multiculturalism – “cultural diversity”, “differences”, the need to “do away with boundaries” – resemble the stock phrases of the modern corporation: “product diversification”, “the global world”, and the “boundary-less company”, Russell Jacoby, “The Myth of Multiculturalism”, *New Left Review*, vol. 208, 1994, p. 123.

⁵ Angela Y. Davis, “Gender, Class, Multiculturalism”, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁶ As I write this a professor of postcolonial criticism in my home department is teaching Khalid Hosseini not as an Afghan but as an Arab-American author!

⁷ Its practitioners never formed a consensus as to what constituted reading a text from a postcolonial perspective or what differentiated a postcolonial text from a non-postcolonial text.

⁸ Ella Shohat, “Notes on the Post-Colonial,” in *Social Text*, vol. 31/32, 1992, p. 99.

to the present day,”¹ or that it “foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle”² sufficed. Postcolonial theory never seemed to define what was actually being done with which body of works.

Such essentialism beset discussions of postcoloniality from its arrival on the critical scene in the wake of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). As time went on, it seemed that no society could not be deemed postcolonial. While lip-service was paid to the special and distinctive regional characteristics of the cultures and literatures under investigation, it was thought that (as in the case of MC) there was some common experience they all shared rooted in the time when “they all emerged from the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with imperial power³” and that this condition could now be called postcoloniality. Significantly, postcolonial criticism (like MC) did not demand knowledge of languages beyond English, although French texts were sometimes included.

There was also something “prematurely congratulatory⁴” about postcolonial criticism’s claim to speak in terms of intervention and resistance when it engaged, in fact, in no political or social reality and functioned exclusively in a rhetorical manner. The postcolonial archive consisted of a handful of endlessly recycled articles by a small group of theorists and a limited body of mostly English published texts, as if these were totally representative of the postcolonial situation. Vernacular texts and literature of “postcolonial” cultures that might not deal with colonialism or did not fit the master narrative of oppression that postcolonial theory promoted did not enter discussion. The primary function of postcolonial analyses resided in their critical theorizing. In fact, the critic’s location and the master narrative of victimization often eclipsed the national historical situation and exegetical context of any text analysed.

Some critics viewed the discourse of postcoloniality as mimicking colonial thinking, since it still ordered the globe according to the single binary of the colonial and the postcolonial. Although it claimed to problematize the binaries of Western historicism⁵, it was felt that the multitudinous cultures of the world were marked and marketed in postcolonial theory (just as was the case in MC) with their geopolitical distinctions telescoped into invisibility⁶. And, indeed, in such criticism, one colonial experience (like one multicultural experience) tended to resemble another. Stripped of cultural specificity, postcolonial prognoses often had little to do with the Third-World reality. Relying 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 projects⁷. A-contextual and fragmentary analyses were accepted out of a deep cynicism regarding the Other as a fossilized object of clinical experimentation. Indiscriminately embracing the Other also risked leveling out various competing Others, as the unfortunate Fredric Jameson discovered when he assumed that all Third-World narratives functioned in the same way as national allegories. Much postcolonial criticism exhibited an uncritical primitivism that privileged non-Western culture and gloried in its presumptive,

¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

² Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, “What is (Post)-colonialism?”, in *Textual Practice*, vol. 5, 1991, p. 399.

³ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴ Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress”, in *Social Text*, vol. 31/32, 1992, p. 87.

⁵ Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress”, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁶ *Id.*, p. 86.

⁷ Deepika Bahri, “Once More with Feeling: What is Postcolonialism?”, in *Ariel*, vol. 26, 1995, p. 52.

eventual – and (this is important) always revolutionary – resurgence¹. As we shall see, such orientalist presumptions continue to operate today.

Like MC, postcolonial criticism relied in great measure on the notion that some heritage of systems limits the reader. Our present condition, although seemingly benign, imposes an existential limit and theory alone can liberate us from systemic constraints². Curiously missing from both MC and postcolonial criticism is any serious questioning of how the text's appearance as a network of hegemonic or subversive gestures suits the state of literary theoretical professionalization. This is for me the salient point. These theories enabled individuals who are truly cut off from any effective social action, yet buoyed by their security as academic professionals, to claim solidarity with the disenfranchised, brand themselves, and propagate the illusion of effective intervention in real time and in the real world. This alienation from real powerlessness (like the academic Marxist's guilt vis à vis the worker) can then be compensated for by a posture of powerlessness vis à vis representation. The result of such a critical stance is that it allows a privileged class of academics the possibility of forging a wide-ranging identification with the marginalized Other. At work here was the age-old problem of the engaged intellectual and the pretense that academic criticism can function as a political act. It is a prime example of how critics attempt to displace "textual culture" with "activist culture."³ Regardless of their own socio-economic status and privileges, the postcolonial critic (like the multicultural critic before him/her) speaks as/for minorities and becomes a representative for minority communities and their victimization. They function, as Deepika Bahri has noted, as "victims in proxy"⁴.

In this fashion, literary studies in American academia today takes pride in its commitment to recognition, tolerance and the acknowledgement of victimhood. The sense of empathy had always been a component of the initial programs in identity studies, such as Black Studies and Women Studies; it was carried over into MC and PC. It was then expanded or transmogrified to include other marginalized groups, finding expression in Queer Studies, Transgendered Studies, Handicapped Studies, Fat Studies, White Male Studies, etc. In many of these purported sub-disciplines, there are seldom any texts involved, or following a trend established by Postcolonial Studies, the canon could consist of a discrete selection of theoretical articles. On the rare occasion when there is a text involved, one looked less at the actual text and more at the critics' experience of the text in terms of their own subjectivity (as Queer, Fat, Transgendered, White Male, etc.). So literary critics now need no longer talk about cultural products at all. They can talk exclusively about themselves. The critic, in fact, can become the text. Self-referentiality had always been present in theory and certain critics (like Gayatri Spivak) took this tendency to new heights, but now it seems to be a significant critical marker. This trend has led us to the cult of the critic as the spokesperson for the globalized Other and disseminator of the world's literary production. In other words, this trend has brought us to American WL.

This new "ism" is actually not new at all, but very similar to the European construct of "General Literature" which in the past formed a dyad with CL, as in the *Journal of General and Comparative Literature* published by Indiana University. General Literature or texts read only in translation, always existed alongside CL in order to incorporate materials of origin outside the local culture and beyond its institutions' capacities to teach in the original languages. In the Soviet

¹ John Clark, "On Two Books by Edward W. Said", in *Jurnal Bicara Seni*, 1996, p. 44.

² Winfried Fluck, "Literature, Liberalism and the Current Cultural Radicalism", in Rüdiger Ahrens and Laurenz Volkmann, eds., *Why Literature Matters: Themes and Functions of Literature*, Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1996, p. 216.

³ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London, Verso, 1992, p. 1.

⁴ Deepika Bahri, "Once More with Feeling: What is Postcolonialism?", *op. cit.*, p. 73.

Block, such general literature courses were labeled WL because the cultural authorities wished to differentiate the research efforts in their institutions from those of the West. However, with the Fall of the Wall, when language training in the US which was already in decline, diminished further and English eclipsed French as the academic *lingua franca*. American re-booted WL presented itself as a project designed to include non-Western literatures that certain comparatists - trained primarily in English Literature and English literature scholars – felt CL had ignored. This rebranding happened much to the amazement of comparatists among us who worked in Asian and African languages and literatures all along. I personally do not think that the “new” American WL is a substitute for the more demanding field of CL. Moreover, I believe that it is questionable to what degree smaller literatures actually get “represented” in this American WL world.¹ The political bent of American WL is explicit. It aims to right the presumed Eurocentric and non-Western wrong seen by its champions as ever-present in CL. It seeks to promote an inclusion deemed missing from current literary studies. In its project of canon reform, it resembles the aims of Cultural Studies (CS), another field of studies that has tried (particularly in Europe and in India) to replace CL.

As we noted in the beginning of this essay, CS also came into being as a discipline during the academic identity and culture wars of the 70’s and 80’s. In Britain, it sought to challenge the value judgments, grading and hierarchies within the field of English and open up the disciplinary structure of the Humanities as a whole,² by challenging the great tradition represented by the likes of F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot. In other words, it interrogated academic institutions and their practices that valorized what it deemed high culture. CS was fueled by the work of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart and the establishment in 1964 of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. This British concept of CS claimed to study culture in a comprehensive way and examine cultural practices and their relationship to power. It sought to expose power relations that influence and shape cultural institutions.³ British CS was essentially engaged in the moral re-evaluation of modern society; it was loyal to a radical line of political action seeking social reconstruction. It endeavored to stretch investigation to include education and business management practices, specific areas where issues of class, gender, or race hide as much as possible their relationship to economic and political differences. When it crossed the pond, CS in the followed the Socialist orientation of the British variety. It offered a liberal and pluralistic perspective which tended to interpret cultural production primarily in terms of capitalist exploitation. However, once transplanted in the US, focused primarily on popular culture, those forms of representation beyond traditional literary works yet nevertheless analyzed as alternative forms of textuality. Moreover, once institutionalized in the States, CS made considerable inroads but did not take over literary studies. It remains a not-too-minor player, combining with CL departments when they were downgraded or absorbed into entities such as Comparative Studies. In India, however, CS has flourished, actively seeking to replace CL departments (perhaps because they were so Anglo-centric) and largely succeeding. In fact, In India CL is taught as if it *is* CS. This trend reflects CL’s English proclivities there and the absence of adequate teaching of Indian

¹ I have had very interesting discussions with my Polish and Estonian colleagues on this point. They are very aware of the fate that awaits their national literatures in such WL anthologies, particularly given the genres favored by their authors.

² Bal, Mieke. “From Cultural Studies to Cultural Analysis,” in Bowman, P. *Introducing Cultural Studies: Theory, Politics and Practice*. London: Pluto, 2003, p. 30.

³ Radhakrishnan, R. “Cultural Studies in India: A Preliminary Report on Institutionalisation” <http://www.cscs.res.in/dataarchive/textfiles/textfile.2008-07-04.357811600/file>

literatures in CL departments. Thus the plural situation in languages and cultures, which are a natural site for CL in India, is being eroded by CS and WL.¹

There are some initial similarities that I wish to point out between American CS and American WL. In both fields, there seems to be an absence of a unique structuring methodology. Both borrow their theories, principles or methods freely from disciplines of the social sciences and the arts industry. Both claim to cross disciplines that CL is thought not to engage. Both are visions of the world formed from the perspective of an English department or scholars trained primarily in English literature. Both are grounded on basic fallacies. In the case of American WL, its practitioners believe that CL was not inclusive of the non-Western world and they propose to right this wrong. In the case of CS, it was thought that interdisciplinary study was absent from the humanities, even though it always existed in CL. Both CS and WL in their American configurations pretend to install an inclusivity and interdisciplinarity that already existed in many CL programs. Both attempt to garner the prime position as the arbiters of humanities education. But, theirs is not the customary hegemonic assault of an English department. Rather, both claim to be involved in a noble and liberating project in their projects of appropriation.

The American WL configuration is completely different in focus. It is nothing more than a reformulation of Area Studies, a Cold War-era Pentagon construction of managing the global situation that was discredited as racist, colonialist and illegitimate a few decades ago. World Literature, like its Cold War and more recent pedagogical precursors, just seeks to market the Other for commodification and consumption in the West. American WL differs, of course, from Area Studies in that it is bankrolled by large publishing conglomerates churning out anthologies rather than the US State Department. But it is similar to MC and postcolonial criticism in that, according to its chief proponent in the US, David Damrosch, it promotes recognition, equal opportunity, and tolerance². But, the projects of Area Studies (the progenitor of all these fields), MC, postcolonial criticism, and American WL are all remarkably the same: The West still interprets the rest. These pedagogies, all claiming to be bringing the literatures and cultural productions from the margins to the center, really just seem to allow critics from the center and scholars of English-language literatures (both in the East and West) to co-opt the margins.

Although American re-booted WL presents itself as an ideal toward which literary studies should aspire, it falls prey to an overwhelming impulse to homogenize. It takes for granted that there exists a common conception of the verbal/linguistic act. It discounts what constitutes a classic in a given society or what differing definitions of literature across cultures might entail. American WL also assumes that the codes of communication that a given system uses to address its intended readers are easily available in other cultures and times³. America's reframing of WL through translation reflects far more the critics' (not necessarily the translator's) framing through his/her hegemonic language rather than that of the local language's writer⁴. There is also a basic problem of translation involved in the process that American WL does not adequately address. Translation usually does not strive to transform the essence of the text in the source language. In translation, a text becomes different, something commensurate in the target language. You make English, what is not English. It is a one-way street: your ensuing English text does not become changed by the experience of the encounter. Rather, the Other becomes changed. In terms reminiscent of Herder's

¹ Personal conversation with Ipshita Chanda.

² David Damrosch, Keynote Address, American Comparative Literature Association, 2011.

³ Ipshita Chanda, "Comparative Literature/World Literature: An Indian Perspective", Paper presented at the International Comparative Literature Association, 2013, p. 7.

⁴ *Id.*, p. 3.

vision of *Humanität*, the American WL translation becomes the true mediator of genius. This notion presupposes an impartiality and an ability of the English translator, whose geography, political situation, and eclectic character lend themselves to the tasks of ordering the genius of other cultures and building new creations from them. On a more personal level, such mediation is an application of the English translator's or editor's presence in the world (*Hiersein*). What is it about the American WL translator/editor that allows him/her to assume another mode of thinking and feeling? In the act of translation, there is not only the expropriation of the Other's artistic production, the communication of knowledge from one tradition to another, but an implicit claim of improving upon it. These are common traits of translation practice.¹ A translation is an independent work, altered from the original. A translation accommodates a text *à la française* or *à l'anglaise*, etc. – removing foreign elements that might impede comprehension and sometimes even perfecting the original. Faithfulness in translation can be seen as a disservice to the reader who expects an agreeable reading experience in which he/she need not question nor be surprised by a text. General accuracy rather than complete fidelity is sought. Making the foreign intelligible often encourages a pedestrian style and idiom². A translation is not a practical intermediary. For this reason, translations provide a default reading, certainly not the preferred mode and certainly not the mode on which to base a pedagogy. Institutionalizing the study of the Other in a format that relies on translation promotes assimilation with domesticating egalitarian demands attached. So, in addition to the American-rebooted WL, other permutations can be found elsewhere in the world. In Europe, for example, we have a variation on the American construct, without any grasp of the political and racial origins of the American variety, fitting it more or less into a European configuration of MC. The Irish and Australian variant of WL seems to recognize the American lack of interest in the issue of translation and attempts to remedy it by reading the world in translation while acknowledging the key problem of canon formation dependent on translation and employing insights from translation theory. Then, there is a Chinese version of WL which often appears as “World Literatures. This particular Chinese version of WL” appears to be institutionalized by the International Association of Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC), whose journals include *The Forum for World Literature*, published out of Purdue University in Indiana, and *Foreign Literary Studies*, published in China. The IAELC was founded in 2112 by Nie Zhanzhao expressly as a counterweight to Western literary studies and their focus on linguistic and formalistic research (such as narratology) and sociological approaches (such as the discourse on power relations, postcolonialism, gender studies, feminism). Such foci are thought to impede the contributions of non-Western original points of view. The IAELC promotes theorizing that is non-Western-centric and based on the work of those peripheries which do not imitate the center. Its thesis, not an unreasonable one, is that there is a deficit of ethical engagement in Western theory. But its remedy to this very real problem is quite curious. Its principle theorist claims that the main function of literature is moral judgment and that such morality is not the purview of the critic. It is imposed from some other source. If humans do not obey a certain type of ethical order, they receive due punishment. According to Nie, the teaching of the literature of the world (and even here, as with American WL, the canon is almost exclusively English, with a predominant emphasis on Shakespeare, and American literature) should contextualize the taboos formed by human

¹ Dorothy Figueira, *Translating the Orient*, New York, SUNY Press, 1991, p. 29.

² *Id.*, p. 31.

rationality as opposed to emotions (primary of which is free will) which are seen as primitive.¹ In short ELC imposes a rigid and strict function on our reading of literature. It demands our submission to some transindividual ethical power.

The manner in which this Chinese vision of WL is actively propagated abroad through journals (particularly the one even published in the American Midwest), international conferences, and cooperative relationships² provides an interesting object lesson in how the world's literatures are currently commodified and marketed. While theoretical schools in the West are playing identity games (Is CL dead?, Is theory dead? Is the author dead? Is the text not a text?), the Chinese have entered into the fray and made a concerted effort to buy up CL, as if it were New York City real estate. Westerners involved in this process are either ignorant of the political focus of Chinese WL, tempted by all-expense tours to China that often coincide with invitations, or blinded by their own orientalism. In any case, they are dupes, as the Editors of *Arcadia* quickly noticed when they took the extraordinary step of giving an issue over to ELC and then being so shocked by its content, that in a first-of-its-kind introduction written by the General Editors of the journal, they disavowed the issue and its ideological marketing of an "Eastern" alternative to CL which was, as the Editors of *Arcadia* noted, "quasi-dictatorial" in focus.³

I in no way wish to suggest that the Western literary theories and pedagogies that I have outlined here are less political than a group such as ELC. The politics of the various American replacements of standard CL merely happen to be of a racial and identitarian order rather than economic and political forces. These attempts to supplant CL (which have been largely successful) focus on postmodernist concerns, such as hybridized and syncretic views of the modern world. The work of Baudrillard has been particularly influential in this regard, especially his notion that travel can be viewed as a spectacular form of amnesia. According to such a theory, any part of the world can be recreated or made to stand for another. In a world of third-order simulacra, encroaching pseudo-places merge to eliminate geographical or ethnic space entirely. This leveling out of the world has contributed to the aforementioned theoretical and pedagogical formulations of the margins, metaphorical spaces in which to dwell that are separate from the real space critics might inhabit. In this metaphorical space, critics can voice ideologies of subversion and rebellion that would be too unsettling, if voiced from their own actual space. Their delicate balancing acts stem from the paradox of academics inhabiting a space of bourgeois comfort, while needing at the same time to distance themselves from global capitalism. Rather than engaging the Other in the act of comparing, critics now seek to appropriate the metaphorical space of the other. By metaphorically inhabiting the margin, critics and theorists hope to exonerate themselves for all the capitalist benefits they receive from their professional lives and status.

There is a clear trajectory to all these theories and pedagogies (Eastern and Western) examined here. There is a similar impulse in their attempts to "impose" or "replace" CL. They were all established to satisfy the political demands of groups seeking cultural representation. ELC is very forthright about this aim. In the US, the politics are convoluted. University administrators are willing to comply with such new and supposedly cutting edge initiatives because they absolve them from having to take on in any real way issues of race and inequality that are still rampant in

¹ See Nie Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundaments and Terms," *Foreign Literary Studies* 32.1 (2010):12-22. For a Western interpretation of ELC, see Juri Talvet, "What is Ethical Literary Criticism: Some Reflections on the Lady Called Filosofia in Dante Alighieri (*Interlitteraria* 19.1 (2014):7-21.

² The ELC met this year in Tartu (Estonia) and plans to meet at the University of London next year. The Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association is scheduled to go to Shenzhen in 2019. The Chinese hosts proposed the theme of WL. It will be interesting to see how CL is done there.

³ Editors' Introduction, *Arcadia* 50,1 (2015):1-3.

many institutions today. The variously ethnically inflected programs are ancillary resources in American Studies Programs, but pretend to be brilliant new high level CL. Since these pedagogies of the Other were embedded in English departments, it is never an issue of appropriate “identity” courses developed on the level of CL. As Gerald Gillespie has noted, no one, students or administrators, wants anything quite so sophisticated. One could offer a course where students could examine how Japanese-Americans felt about their lives in the US, but a course contrasting their experiences in various languages and literary works to those of diasporic Japanese (newcomers or their descendents) throughout the world, or examining their cultural production against the peer generation at home in Japan – such a course was not desirable.¹ It was in the interest of lazy students and cynical administrators that the other be consumed on the cheap. So what we got were the aforementioned watered down pedagogies examined here. As I noted, they are all creations of English department desirous of coopting lucratively the territory of other humanities programs (such as national literatures and CL) as well as the social sciences, without learning languages or employing the disciplinary rigors of fields such as sociology or anthropology. English departments are used to such colonizations, they had earlier coopted theory (read in snippets in translated anthologies); now they were trying to ape the scientists – the only people valued in the corporate university.

In this process, we find the meeting of incommensurables – a deep seated need for the experience of political engagement coming out of the 1960s meeting a 1990’s need to be media savvy, to package and market intellectual capital and a 2000’s option of taking the project global. There is no small irony here, in how easily these conceptual frameworks have melded. If the belief in criticism as a viable intervention is a relic of the 60s that has proven itself bankrupt (which I think it has), we might want to view all these purportedly cutting-edge pedagogies as ventures in socio-political impotence. Potency, when it exists, resides in the critic’s relationship to colleagues as it is constructed through the coinage and use of jargon, their postures as public intellectuals, and, significantly, their collaborations with university administrators and academic or trade publishers. And their exportation/exploitation of the commodity they market.

In American institutions today, intellectual endeavors are always trumped by commercial potential. The marketing opportunities of these new pedagogies and theories are twofold. First, there is marketing to and through university administrators who buy into the idea that an initiative such as American WL (like postcolonial criticism and MC before it and Transnational Literature in its wake) provides the most advanced and “logical” approach to the miasma of competing cultures and ethnicities. Of course, in such initiatives, engaging the global Other easily degenerates, as Shohat and Stam have noted, into the diversity of college catalogues and state- or corporate-managed United Colors of Benetton pluralism². Then, an initiative such as WL (like MC and postcolonial criticism before it) market themselves as cutting-edge forms of “restructuring” CL and purport to offer a radical responses to new socio-economic realities.

The practical reason for all this packaging of alterity, whether it be a newly-minted WL departments, or Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies programs, or even the new Transnational Literature programs is obvious: all these “specializations” are relatively easy. They do not involve in-depth knowledge of another culture or demand learning foreign languages, skills that have fallen by the wayside among American students. In fact, one of the explicit reasons for WL, as formulated

¹ Personal communication.

² Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds., *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 6.

by Damrosch, is the difficulty of adequate language training eroding the competency of many Comparative Literature programs. The inability to train students in languages and literatures derives from the aforementioned decline in learning and standards beginning in the 60s. WL's solution to these lower standards is to universalize them.¹ Pedagogies such as MC, postcolonial criticism and now WL allow texts to preserve their own heritage, that is, as long as that heritage speaks English². Such pedagogies also feed American isolationism. WL's leveling out of the literatures of the Other is only matched by CS's indiscriminate and diffuse treatments of all and sundry forms of cultural production. Both lack CL's linguistic and theoretical specificity.

The study of CL demands specialization in at least the three national language. Optimally, comparatists can seek employment in CL or any of their language literatures. In other words, the comparatist knows enough to be an expert in various specializations. In this respect, CL differs considerably from CS which purports to engage the social sciences and even pretends that such work be seen as preferable to CL. There is an important difference between the two in terms of competence. Unlike comparatists, CS scholars do not simultaneously go on the market as anthropologists or sociologists because their work cannot stand disciplinary scrutiny. What CS produces is a simulacrum of these social sciences, enough to impress narrow-focused colleagues in an English department. A parallel process occurs in WL. Here too, we have a willed rejection of expertise. As Gerald Gillespie has noted, Kafka is taught in translation in the English department and not in the German department alongside Kafka in German.³ As an ancillary repertory for English departments, CS and WL can eschew learning the languages of others, while claiming to speak for and valorize identities submerged by power structures and thereby strike the pose of being non-elitist.

But the reality is far more prosaic. CS and WL partake of the hegemon status usually afforded to English departments in American universities. They vie for the first say in how the humanities curriculum should be organized. They appropriate authors and works from other literatures and disciplines rather than defer to the general expertise of other departments. By lifting subjects and authors from other fields in which they are not themselves experts (philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc), WL and CS shove aside experts and cultural theory in this process of colonization. In this manner, American WL can be seen as a globalized form of CS.

The result of this leveling out of expertise is the vitiation of faculty competence and range. Essential courses are replaced with fad courses and these are usually taught by a peon caste of under-educated TAs and junior faculty. Such reduction in quality and competence plays into the hands of lazy administrators (often scientists) who possess a limited vision and a desire to promote themselves by cutting costs and dealing exclusively with cheaper faculty. With such curricula in place, administrators can placate the identity politics of their institutions without doing anything substantive to combat persistent racial and gender inequities. English professors and English departments thus become the custodians of "international" "cross-cultural" and "worldly" research and teaching.

What is insidious is that American branded WL, like MC and Postcolonial studies, claims to offer the putative end of meta-narratives, while, in reality, it only offers a one-way street, with Anglophone culture as the one recognizing the non-Anglophone and often non-white culture. In order "to be" or "speak out", the non-white and/or non-Anglophone culture must seek legitimacy

¹ Personal communication.

² Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 112.

³ Personal communication.

and recognition from Anglophone white culture and use the language of that culture to produce itself¹. Institutionalizing the study of alterity in such a format obscures issues of power and privilege. In fact, it sanctions a tokenistic approach to dealing with difference². The recent revival of WL, like the earlier pedagogies of alterity, is conceptualized as a project that uncovers occluded and submerged identities and liberates the repressed through the dissemination of peoples' histories. By unmasking and repudiating inferential racism, it seeks to redraw boundaries and affirm the authority of external cultures and internal colonies. However, amidst all of WL's talk of reframing, flows and inclusivity, there is really no discussion about the relations of power, the market, canon formation and even the notion of "literature" in the moment of global capital³. These pedagogies do nothing to minimize the damage perpetrated by hierarchies of ethnic privilege, discrimination, class divisions and systemic inequalities that remain intact in American universities today. The real concern is not just the texts that transmit the heritage of the humanities in order to preserve standards and promote excellence. Rather we should ask who defines the standards of excellence and whose interests are at stake? Who should articulate the purpose and meaning of a humanities education and how? In other words, who makes the tasty salad, who is meant to consume it, and what is its nutritional value?

In *Otherwise Occupied*, I made the case that all these academic theories and pedagogies of the Other (identity studies, MC, postcolonial criticism, and now we might add WL) were constructed and are used in the United States to undermine Affirmative Action by influencing institutional policies for recruitment. Theoretical constructions of the Other proliferated in direct proportion to the failure of statistical evidence to support the success claims of institutional diversity. In other words, they aided in masking the continued marginalization and containment of America's minorities within academia. They also dovetail very nicely with university marketing concerns. In the past, universities occluded low numbers in diversity by establishing various ethnic studies programs and peopling them with under-represented ethnics. Granted it was not an ideal situation. As I have noted, it was a balkanization of ethnics into fields for which they were deemed biologically and culturally suited. Minorities were thus neutralized and contained in such placements. Now, with pedagogies focused on representing (and not necessarily studying in any real fashion) under-represented populations, universities need not even hire minorities. To quote Aijaz Ahmad⁴, under the guise of studying colonialisms of the past we facilitate imperialisms of the present. Under the guise of promoting tolerance, pedagogies of alterity enable academic elites to displace, diffuse, and thus intensify class, gender, and racial contradictions. In American WL, the latest bureaucratization of Othering, we may even be witnessing the process of "taking back" the American university from both the minorities still based in identity studies and Third World "model minorities" supervising multicultural and postcolonial studies. American WL claims to be a democratizing pedagogy; it deems CL elitist because it demands learning foreign languages. But I ask you, what is more exclusionary and elitist than practicing a brand of criticism that claims to champion a voiceless and under-represented world but does so only in the English language by non-ethnics and Third-World elites? Since when does the imposition of Western ways of thinking

¹ Fazal Rizvi, "The Arts, Education and the Politics of Multiculturalism", in Sneja Gunew and Fazal Rizvi, eds., *Culture, Difference and the Arts*, St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1994, p. 63.

² Rey Chow, "Theory, Area Studies, Cultural Studies: Issues of Pedagogy in Multiculturalism", in Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, eds., *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2002, p. 113.

³ Ipshita Chanda, "PostWorld Literature: Thoughts from a 'Post' Colony", Unpublished paper presented at George Mason University, 2013, p. 7.

⁴ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London, Verso, 1992, p. 222.

on the non-Western world make us non-elite and democratic? Clearly, we should not take at face value academic projects that blithely claim to engage in a reform process, especially when the readings they offer still stem from a privileged perspective and its norms. We should rather interrogate what is behind gestures that promise to reinstall the standards of cultural and linguistic specificity to the discipline of CL. Especially, if what they deliver is considerably less than what CL has known and practiced for decades without subtitles. Eliminating linguistic standards does not democratize anything. It only points to American nativism, cultural provincialism, triumphalism, and a deep indifference to the world. It may even reflect a little bit of racism.

With CL quickly being co-opted by American WL or globalized CS, comparatists need to ask themselves whether they want to remain in such a dysfunctional relationship. It is one thing to go along with CL's theoretical promiscuity (it might even be seen to liven up the marriage) and its flirtations with other disciplines (which do cause us some embarrassment when encountering experts in those fields), but do we really want to impose this relationship on others? In the final analysis, identity is not simply a matter of positionality and these pedagogies do not present any means of recuperating sensibilities disintegrated by society and the labor market¹. Such problems cannot be solved by university canon reform. The neutral shibboleths of difference and diversity cannot replace real-life suffering and struggle for survival and dignity². These pedagogical configurations of the Other and expressions of the Self are all "performances." WL, in particular, offers a simplistic yet attractive way to "understand" the world, while allowing the Self to act in the spectacle of "globalized" literature. Merely "performing" is the spectacle opens no viable avenue for further action. It is clear that in the twenty-first century students need to be able to experience and interrogate the totality of the world's literatures, not just the constricted and diluted product packaged and marketed by the self-serving managers of American academia.

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¹ Epiphany San Juan, *Racial Formations/Critical Transformations: Articulations of Power in ethnic and Racial studies in the United States*, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1992, p. 4.

² *Id.*, p. 138.