DOROTHY M. FIGUEIRA

Comparative Literature versus World Literature

Recent theories and pedagogies of alterity such as multiculturalism and postcolonialism have had a significant impact on the discipline of Comparative Literature and the teaching of World Literature. They have, in many institutions, taken over the activity of comparative analyses between cultures and literatures and have achieved this importance in venues that preempt the traditional role of Comparative Literature. Goethe's call to form a *Weltliteratur* and enrich one's own culture through the acknowledgment of other models of artistic expression, such as Sanskrit *kâvya*, may seem anachronistic and naive to us today. However, we should not forget that the discipline of Comparative Literature was formed from just such a cosmopolitan desire to embrace diversity. Comparative Literature began by seeking to engage the known world, albeit with very insufficient tools. Over time, it became institutionally far less global in its perspective. However, even in its most Eurocentric and isolationist moments, it is preferable to the cynicism that often motivates the market-based consumerism that has come to define present-day academic encounters with the Other.

In American institutions today, it seems that we engage the world less out of curiosity than because of marketing concerns. Marketing in this context is twofold. First, there is marketing to and through university administrators who buy into the idea that alterity initiatives are the most advanced and "logical" approach to the miasma of competing cultures and ethnicities. In such cases, engaging the other easily degenerates into the diversity of college catalogues and state- or corporate-managed United Colors of Benetton pluralism (Shohat and Stam 6). Through such initiatives, institutions can recruit and pretend to "restructure" with supposedly radical responses to new socio-economic realities. One such recent restructuring can be seen in the development of new programs in World Literature. I wonder if the recent rediscovery of World Literature, a field often housed in Comparative Literature departments, and its establishment as free-standing programs of study might not be conceptualized as the latest avatar of the theories and pedagogies purporting to engage alterity that have sprung up on campuses in the last three decades. If the recent revival of World Literature is a reflection of identity studies as currently configured in American academe, what, if any, common features does it share with other recent attempts to engage the Other? What effect do pedagogies of alterity have on our field and how do we train students to engage the world?

The practical reason for this packaging of alterity, whether it be a newly-minted World Literature departments, Multicultural or Postcolonial Studies programs, is obvious: all these "specializations" are relatively easy. They do not involve in-depth knowledge of another culture or demand learning foreign languages. In such pedagogies, each text preserves its own heritage as long as it speaks English (Prashad 112). Such pedagogies also feed American isolationism. In the Internet age, when the globalization of English has contributed to diminishing the need to learn languages, the Other can in these formats be consumed "on the cheap." Furthermore, such celebrations of otherness and diversity in no way compromise American tendencies to cultural provincialism, triumphalism, or indifference to the world. Like those popular ethnic fairs one finds in the States, World Literature, like Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies, allows students to taste other cultures without digesting them. The resounding global education that such pedagogies offer a literature student can consist of nothing more than snippets from endless recycled "representative" authors writing or translated into the English language.

Moreover, within such pedagogical initiatives, there is a real incentive not to respect the intellectual history or genealogy of an area of study. There is no necessity to contextualize the foreign or ethnic experience or broaden its significance by drawing any association to a source culture that might extend knowledge beyond the master narrative that one has responsibly engaged the world. By thus appropriating the Other, pedagogies of alterity sanction a selectively ignorant exploration, ensuring a general failure of real engagement. Their deficiencies not only reveal ignorance but highlight the hubris of those who wish to speak for and hence co-opt the Other.

The world, whether it be the first or the third, defies packaging, especially by a cadre of professors and administrators claiming to offer a viable mechanism for adjustments of power within Western and historically white-dominated societies. While some might pretend that pedagogies of alterity provide a workable model for civic tolerance in societies struggling to free themselves from the burden of their white supremacist past (Hutcheon and Richmond), others quite correctly view such efforts as willful aestheticized discourses that inadvertently serve to disguise persistent racial tensions. In affecting a respect for the Other as a reified object of cultural difference, pedagogies of alterity as currently configured in American academe deliver only a fragmented and watered-down vision. Moreover, they might even deflect attention away from social issues such as discrimination, unequal access, and hierarchies of ethnic privilege that are far from being resolved (Huggan 126) in academe today.

Pedagogies of alterity, such as Multicultural or Postcolonial Studies and new World Literature initiatives, all seem to affirm the virtues of the margins. How-

ever, they risk in the process leaving the centers of power uncontested (Gitlin 236). While they claim to offer the putative end of meta-narratives, they really only offer a one-way street, with Anglophone culture as the one recognizing the non-Anglophone and, in the case of multiculturalism and postcolonialism, non-white culture. In order "to be" or "speak out," the non-white and /or non-Anglophone culture must seek the legitimacy and recognition from white culture and use the language of white culture to produce itself (Rizvi 63). Institutionalizing the study of otherness in such a format promotes assimilation with domesticating egalitarian demands attached. It tends to obscure issues of power and privilege. Moreover, it deals with differences by making them tokenistic (Chow 113).

The recent revival of World Literature, like the earlier pedagogies of alterity, are conceptualized by many as having arisen in an attempt to uncover occluded and submerged identities and to liberate the repressed through the dissemination of peoples' histories. By unmasking and repudiating inferential racism, their project claims to redraw boundaries and affirm the authority of external cultures and internal colonies. There are some scholars, however, who view the installation of such pedagogies in less benevolent terms. They conceive the establishment of identity studies a strategy of an academic elite seeking to displace, diffuse, and thus intensify class, gender, and racial contradictions. Since class divisions and systemic inequalities remain intact in these pedagogies, the case can even be made that they serve to mask hegemonic domination under the pretext of pluralist tolerance (San Juan, *Racial Formations* 15). In other words, the culturalist approach to ethnicity valorizes differences to guarantee sameness (San Juan. *Hegemony and Strategies* 237). Let us briefly examine how this process might work. Beginning by charting how English departments have co-opted the study of the Other, we will look at how this colonization has spearheaded the current revival of World Literature.

The literature of the world could emigrate to an English department because, for the greater part of the 80's and 90's, English literature departments in many institutions had waged successful battles with other administrative units to become the campus experts on theory. Since comparatists and national literature scholars had translated and written primers on recent European theory, all English departments had to do was step in and anoint themselves the true scholars of critical thought and commandeer the enrollments that went along with the theory craze. Then, with the paradigm shift from the aesthetic to the cultural studies model, certain English departments began to supplement their curricula with courses dealing less with literature per se and more with issues of identity and its construction. As theory emigrated to English, so too then did all the sub-fields dealing with identity politics. The first wave of such courses were Women's and Black Studies, soon to be followed by Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies. The task of rethinking the mission of re-

gions outside Europe (and particularly the Third World) could also be co-opted by English departments since, their original homes in area studies were undergoing internal ideological crises and downsizing due to changes in governmental priorities.

We should not lose sight of the fact that this transformation of English departments into "identity" studies opened the field of possible specializations within a discipline that faced greater difficulty placing its doctoral students within the more traditional paradigms of English literature. Identity studies were boons to English departments. In fact, they offered English departments a new identity and marketable field of critical knowledge with countless possible openings for any number of job and degree candidates. It is not, therefore, by chance that English departments remade themselves as Identity Studies and World Literature precisely at the time when it s graduate programs were overpopulated with students facing diminishing prospects and fewer viable subjects left for dissertations. The new sub-fields that sprang up purported to cross spatial as well as disciplinary borders. An important thing to note about these locales is that they did not necessarily demand any site-specific knowledge of languages or historical context.

In the migration of the world as a disciplinary site to the field of English Studies, we find a situation akin to that described by Arjun Appadurai as the aesthetics of decontextualization, where ethnic products become authentic through cultural dislocation. Appadurai cites the study of Third World literature in English departments as a case in point (Appdurai 28). Through a process wherein readers sympathetically identify with such decontextualized products, cultural ignorance not only results, but is sanctioned. It thus provides a test case for Guillory's critique of the institutional leveling out of putatively marginal cultural forms (Guillory 37–38). Disparate world texts, collectively studied in English and coopted for a largely imaginary pedagogic agenda, are thus deployed as forms of cultural capital. The literature of the world is leveled out in such an institutional setting (Guillory 37–38). It becomes not only an oppositional academic discipline but also an attractive and non-threatening object of consumption. This process involves turning literatures of the non-West into saleable exotic objects. World, Multicultural, and Postcolonial literatures thus become what Aijaz Ahmad has termed fetishized commodities (Ahmad 127).

The practicality of English departments' usurpation of the world was that they could in many institutions colonize the now discredited area studies and the smaller and therefore more vulnerable Comparative Literature programs. In the process of uncovering racist oppression within literature, they were able to wage an effective imperialistic campaign of their own. Pedagogies of alterity such as Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies not only saved English departments, they gave them a new lease on life. In the process, they allowed them to claim to combat imperialist mentalities of the past while waging a disciplinary and institutional hege-

monic offensive in the present. Most importantly, they revalorized the notion that one could responsibly read the world in translation.

The question that needs to be asked then is the following: What vision of the world do these pedagogies that eschew the careful study of languages, literatures, and cultures—precisely those skills and habits that, ironically enough, Gayatri Spivak herself praises throughout *The Death of a Discipline* as the traditional strengths of Comparative Literature—actually impart? If the rise of pedagogies of alterity pose any real threat to Comparative Literature as a discipline, it is because of the apparent ease with which their initiates can become experts. Because they do not require Comparative Literature's linguistic skills or an expert's familiarity with specific national cultures and histories, these pedagogies allow for (and even encourage) a theoretical approach that conflates individual histories and contexts. Thus their false consciousness: they emerge as faux-disciplines whose practitioners can celebrate cultural difference and hybridity and speak in solidarity with the Other without ever having to partake of their actual struggles. They can gain a marketable specialization without too much effort or need for theoretical, political, and cultural homework (Srivastava 15).

What born-again comparatist Spivak calls for in *The Death of a Discipline*—a "reconstellation" of the discipline that retains its traditional strengths while embracing a suspiciously postcolonial-sounding "planetarity" (Spivak 91)—again promises to do everything in the manner of demonstrable over-inflation: preserve traditional strengths while opening up to cultural and linguistic differences within national literatures and retain and defend the value of language skills. True to the unfortunate tendency that has come to define postcolonial discourse analysis, Spivak asserts all this but offers only an anecdotal, willfully eclectic exposition of what such a Comparative Literature might look like, how it might operate in a world increasingly dominated by facile monolingual Postcolonial, World, and Cultural Studies. Rather than a prescription or manifesto, Spivak presents the book as a call to action "in the hope that there may be some in the academy who do not believe that the critical edge of the humanities should be appropriated and determined by the market" (Spivak xii). This approach is, of course, consistent with the postcolonial critic's pretense of "openness" toward the future as Spivak herself asserts: "we must, as literature teachers in the classroom . . . let literature teach us that there are no certainties, that the process is open, and that it may be salubrious that it is so" (Spivak 26).

Perhaps. But then again, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Spivak's strategy exemplifies the dishonesty pervading recent literary theories and pedagogies of alterity today: espousing an open-endedness in order to occlude a concerted lack of cultural knowledge, specificity, and ultimately, respect for the cultures supposedly being studied. Spivak's lofty disinterest allows her in a final, unfortunate parenthesis at the end of *Death of a Discipline* to blithely throw together figures as dispa-

rate as José Martí and W.E.B. Du Bois for no better reason than that they represent "two widely known, heroic figures from the older minorities, writers of a previous dispensation" (Spivak 92). She can invoke the two great modernists not to carefully discuss their works, but to employ them in her own critical project of "the turning of identitarian monuments into documents for reconstellation" (Spivak 91). This profoundly disappointing, yet not surprising conclusion to Spivak's book points in a discouraging way to what actually can be taken for serious engagement with the Other. If one of our discipline's most renowned professors practices her craft in this fashion, what does it tell us about the direction of Comparative Literature?

My question is actually more simple—does the resurgence of interest in World Literature betoken an effort on the part of scholars to retool themselves now that other theories and pedagogies of alterity have proved bankrupt? What better persona to adopt, in the age of multiculturalism and globalism, than that of a comparatist doing World Literature? Or better yet, why not adopt the posture of a World Literature scholar whose formation has been almost exclusively in English literature and who makes a career championing a brand of criticism that claims to engage a voiceless and under-represented world? Or even, one can remain a national literature scholar who has previously ignored the methodology and linguistic expertise traditional to the discipline of Comparative Literature, but now positions oneself as a prophet calling for a return to the very skills that one's own scholarship has consistently eschewed. I think that, perhaps, the lesson to be learned is simple: We should not take at face value academic projects that blithely claim to engage in a reform process. We should certainly interrogate what is behind gestures that promise to reinstall the standards of cultural and linguistic specificity to the discipline of Comparative Literature. Especially, if what they deliver is considerably less than what comparatists have known and practiced for decades without subtitles.

Is it somehow possible to avoid transporting the inadequacies and failures of the past into future investigations of alterity? Can we move beyond empty rhetoric and self-serving postures? It is possible that scholars should begin a reexamination with the goal of evaluating in a clear and unambiguous way successes and failures of our methodologies. We should be able, after 9/11, to admit that there is a failure to grasp the essential role played by indigenous contexts and languages that has led to subsequent egregious failures of interpretation and understanding. The postmodern tendency to treat all literatures as a kind of meta-language that can be lifted out of its natural linguistic context and examined on the a-historical specimen tray of contemporary theory has proved to be woefully inadequate. What is urgently needed is not a continuation of these Lilliputian exercises but a commitment to understanding literature's connection to and elucidation of the socio-cultural context from which it springs.

In her contribution to this issue, Rajini Srikanth draws the connection between

the hegemonizing nature of collecting the world's literatures as a new form of imperialism, particularly in the field of publishing. In Europe, 40–50 percent of the books published and sold in bookstores are translations. In the United States, only 3 percent of the books published are translations (Salamon; cited in Srikanth). These statistics speak volumes for the provincialism, cultural arrogance and general ignorance of the American reading public. In response to this phenomenon, a group of concerned scholars have established an online magazine for international literature entitled *Words without Borders*[1] that collects representative literature from around the world labeled in the following fashion:

> Africa/Americas/ Asia/Europe/Middle East/ Pacific Rim
> Cities/Coasts/Mountains/Plains/Deserts/Forests/Villages

What is significant here is the manner in which this initiative configures the world, portioning it as cartographical units, not as real places.[2] This initiative speaks volumes for how pedagogies of alterity have envisioned a leveled out and intellectually meaningless construction of alterity.

The institutionalization of World Literature, like other pedagogies of alterity, claims to redistribute rights and radically rethink issues of recognition. My fear is that these efforts create a smokescreen for societal and institutional unwillingness to change the academic situation of *real* Others, namely minorities in American academe. With such theories and pedagogies, institutions can avoid grappling with race and difference under the pretense of doing something progressive. Like the Internet initiative *Words without Borders*, the institutionalization of alterity initiatives exhibit an inferential racism when they breed and encourage ethnicity-oriented scholarship that contributes to the continued marginalization of minorities within academe. Strategies of containment obscure the stasis of power and privilege rather than redistribute rights and rethink recognition. Even with these pedagogies of alterity firmly installed in academic institutions, the standards are still defined and the purpose of the humanities is still articulated as they always have been. It should be clear that alterity cannot be "administered." Academic bureaucracy is wholly unequipped to properly confront, contextualize and engage an American ethnic, let alone Third World Other. A reevaluation of the administrative and scholarly approach to the Other is, therefore, essential. Emphasis should be placed on historical background, sensitivity to cultural nuance and the development of knowledge and understanding. As it now stands, we have new initiatives directed by the same cast of characters—the monolingual, white, male scientist dean who still determines how heterogenous cultures are organized and taught, even if the actual teaching is outsourced to various ventriloquists.

University of Georgia

NOTES

1 See www.wordswithoutborders.org.

2 Also significant is that the name alludes to the noble humanitarian struggle of Médecins sans Frontières.

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