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Author(s): Michael Bérubé

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CULTURAL STUDIES AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE?

Michael Bérubé

Some years ago I guest-edited a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on the topic of "postmodernism and the globalization of English." When I mentioned it to friends, colleagues, and associates, sometimes (but not always) in the course of soliciting submissions, they almost uniformly looked at me quizzically and said, "you *do* mean 'post*colonialism* and the globalization of English,' don't you?" No, I replied, the whole point of the issue is to revive and revisit Anthony Appiah's famous question as to whether the post- in postmodernism is the same as the post- in postcolonial, and to see both "posts" as being related in some way to the world in which the sun has long since set on the British Empire but still never sets on the English language. This special issue attempts something similar, or at least similarly strange: bringing together two fields with uncertain boundaries, two fields that might plausibly speak to (or merely about) each other more often than they have in the past twenty years or so.

One of the minor curiosities of recent intellectual history is that major theoretical developments and schools have tended to take their initial shape from the period or the subdiscipline with which they were first associated. This proposition may sound tautological—*well, of course they take their "initial shape" from their "first" association*—but in fact, there is no necessary or inevitable correspondence between, say, deconstruction and Romanticism, or New Historicism and the English Renaissance/early modern period, or Lacanian psychoanalysis and film theory. There are, surely, good reasons why queer theory has had more to say about Henry James or Oscar Wilde than about William Langland, and it does seem to be the case that literary and cultural texts respond more richly to some kinds of inquiries than others. But there does not seem to be any reason why cultural studies and comparative literature have had so little to do with one another in the United

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States, apart from the accidents of institutional history thanks to which we associate the comparative literature tradition more with the arrival of phenomenology, structuralism, and deconstruction on American shores, and the cultural studies tradition more with the arrival of British Marxism and post-Marxism. That these accidents of institutional history correspond, in some ways, to different intellectual traditions and trajectories is not, in the end, a sufficient explanation for why they have run in parallel courses for so long. (Even innovative academic departments such as Minnesota's "Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature" look like experiments in juxtaposition: Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies constitute two wholly different programs of study, with Studies in Cinema and Media Culture serving as a third.) Of course, I cannot presume to say whether the six essays presented here establish permanent points of contact between cultural studies and comparative literature; but I can say that both fields have been radically opened and significantly transformed over the past decade and a half, and that the moment is propitious for building a crossroads.

Paul K. Saint-Amour's uncannily timely—or cannily untimely—essay opens with bombardment and fear: not a simple fear of an unprecedented form of war (bombing) or a generalized fear of death, but "a condition of hideously prolonged expectation, a state of emergency that is both perennial, in having been detached from the arrival of violence in a singular event, and horribly deferred—the advance symptom of a disaster still to come." That condition corresponds to 1930s air raids as described by Lewis Mumford and postwar shell shock as delineated by Virginia Woolf, but of course it names the interwar period itself, those two decades of anxiety and dread between November 1918 and September 1939. "The memory and dread of aerial bombing," writes Saint-Amour, "not only figured prominently in interwar public discourse and the concurrent urban imaginary but also constituted the locus classicus for a kind of proleptic mass-traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to an anticipated rather than an already realized catastrophe." Against that backdrop of trauma past, trauma present, and trauma yet to come, Saint-Amour sets modern novelists' "drive to archive the urban totality in the face of its increasing susceptibility to erasure in wartime"—in this case, by means of provocative readings of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz.*

Christopher Bush continues the modernist thread in an Other vein, beginning with Rey Chow's argument that the disruptions we associate with "theory" and "cultural studies" can be more productively construed in

terms of the social and historical disruptions that provided the conditions of possibility for the emergence of theory and cultural studies, and moving quickly to the trenchant observation that the long history of Western Orientalism includes a fair number of Western writers who were quite savvy about Western Orientalism. In Oscar Wilde and Roland Barthes especially (though not exclusively), Bush finds self-conscious, deeply ironic invocations of Orientalism—"the whole of Japan is a pure invention," "Japan is merely a reserve of features"—that refigure non-Western difference *from* as a trope for internal difference *within* the West while simultaneously refusing and repeating the forms of othering on which Orientalism itself is predicated. In a surprising and ambitious series of closing moves, Bush asks, "is it possible to square conceptions of modernism as a cultural response to the simultaneous apex and crisis of European hegemony, with colonialism abroad and war and revolution at home, with those of modernism as tending toward an anti-referential language giving pleasure through form?" and insists that "literary form and cultural difference are not only not mutually exclusive, they are often mutually constitutive." Here, perhaps, Bush's aesthetics of comparative cultural studies begins to account both for cultural forms and imperial histories—by shifting, as in Bush's conclusion, from the Other to the other, "from the ontological to the ontic, from alterity to mere difference."

In Linda Brooks's careful and subtle reading of *testimonio*, theories of cultural difference run up against particularly confounding cultural forms: even as *testimonio* has been taken up as subaltern narrative *verité* and hailed for "the unimpeachability of the witness's testimony," the revelations of the inaccuracies and fabrications of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, as revealed by David Stoll in 1999, have led *testimonio*'s defenders to stress the elusiveness and unreliability of the form. Steering deftly through Menchú's attackers and Menchú's apologists, Brooks insists that *testimonio* is above all a mode of performance; that our contemporary theories of performance and performativity have failed to take *testimonio* sufficiently into account; and that its "performance strategies [. . .] emerge not as subversions of *testimonio*'s social message but as vehicles *of* it." In so doing, Brooks carries forward Bush's proposition that literary form and cultural difference are mutually constitutive: for Brooks, *testimonio* is performance and "ideological self-fashioning" all the way down, so to speak, from the initial staging encounter to the final stages of publication– during which, as Brooks shows, crafty editors like Ruth Behar (in *Translated Woman*) or Florencia Mallon (in *When a Flower is Reborn*) can choose to foreground their own mediations, or crafting editors like Elisabeth Burgos can choose to minimize their intermedi-

ary roles while maximizing the "representational" status of their subjects. "Clearly literary creations," Brooks writes, "*testimonios* languish for lack of serious study *as* literary works. Even in instances where editors give no sign of the witness's kinetic and vocal practices (or of their own), the witness's irrepressible performance can, with proper reading tools, come through."

The adequacy of our reading tools is challenged at every point by Jeanette Herman's essay on conventions of sensibility and sentimentality in the *sati* debate of the early nineteenth century. From the tableau on the frontispiece of James Peggs' pamphlet, *India's Cries to British Humanity* to the closing pages of Mrs. General Mainwaring's 1830 novel, *The Suttee; or, the Hindoo Converts*, *sati* presents us, argues Herman, with the question of how to read the widow's desire, how to interpret her "cries" to humanity. Following up on the work of Gayatri Spivak, Lata Mani, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Herman moves beyond the now-familiar scenario of white men saving brown women from brown men in order to foreground the exchanges between white women and brown women. Herman demonstrates first that even the most "rational" British arguments against *sati* are framed by the "residual structure of feeling carried over from the eighteenth-century tradition of sensibility and its role in humanitarian and philanthropic endeavors"; from there, she moves to Mainwaring's nineteenth-century sentimental novel, arguing that "whereas images from the [*sati*] debate portray the women who died either as victims of outright murder or a barbaric religion that makes them complicit in their own oppression, Mainwaring represents *sati* as the greatest desire of Hindu women, reflecting their devotion to their husbands past even the moment of death." In this respect, surprisingly, the Hindu woman is not only legible but actually similar to the British woman: "Mainwaring represents [*sati*] as horrible, but at the same time as the basis for a similarity of feeling between British and Hindu women, alike in their domestic virtue and wifely devotion"—and this in a novel which envisions that similarity of feeling as the basis for an Anglicized, Christianized India.

Camilla Fojas keeps us in the nineteenth century but takes us to Chicago: in her reading of Henry Adams' and Aurelia Castillo de González's readings of the 1893 World's Columbus Exposition, even the most imposing monuments to American empire and Western modernity become ambiguous. Adams, as always a man of his time and out of his time, finds in the Dynamo and in the 1893 Depression a harbinger of the world to come, and beats a retreat to Chartres and the twelfth century; but Castillo de González finds in the fair—and, indeed, in Chicago itself—a model of modernity for all Latin American cities. Noting Adams' wry remark, "that

the Exposition should be a natural growth and product of the Northwest offered a step in evolution to startle Darwin," Fojas argues that Adams "positioned himself as cynically ambivalent in the midst of divided public opinion about the future of the United States"; and yet, as Fojas shows, even though Castillo de González comes to Chicago from Cuba, a country ranked considerably lower on the evolutionary scale of humanity by the Exposition itself, she responds with neither cynicism nor ambivalence. Hopefully and counterintuitively reading the Cuban exhibit in the Exposition—hidden "in an obscure place under the stairs"—as an augury of Cuban independence, Castillo de González deliberately ignores the imperial and racial triumphalism of the Exposition in order to propose Chicago as "a how-to manual of Pan-American modernity." While for Adams the Fair "displayed confidence, even arrogance, in an era marked by a national economic depression," Castillo de González's conservative and nationalist rereading of Chicago, Fojas suggests, offers us a kind of *detournement* as Fair play.

Brenda Machosky closes the issue with a challenging, contrarian essay—not on cultural studies or on comparative literature, but on the radical uncertainty of the ground on which cultural studies and comparative literature might meet: "the profession of literature is in crisis," Machosky writes, "because it lacks a stable ground upon which to stand. The crisis is inseparable from the definition of literature, which resists being defined." This is not a lament, not a call for better grounds and sharper definitions; it is a principled insistence on what John Mowitt once called the anti-disciplinarity of textuality itself. Returning to the comparative tradition that introduced deconstruction to American universities thirty years ago, Machosky cites Peggy Kamuf's argument that the "division of literature"—that is, the literature division and the division that is literature—has put the university itself "in deconstruction," and insists that "the lesson of de Man's attempt to address institutional concerns about literary theory still needs to be learned." Echoing the de Manian maxim that "it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true," Machosky insists that teachers and students of literature not reduce the question of literature to a matter of institutional bookkeeping, that we heed not only de Man and Kamuf but Kafka, whose fugitive parable of the hunger artist reminds us that "literature demands hunger, and we cannot fast in the presence of literature any more than we can feast on it." For those who hunger, Machosky's essay is, I hope, an edifying in-conclusion on the subject that subtends any possible configuration of comparative literature and cultural studies—the subject of the text itself.