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In 2000, the International Comparative Literature Association convened its triennial meeting in Pretoria, South Africa. The theme of the conference was "The Paths of Multiculturalism." Even in its organizing phase, I was leery of this topic. In academic institutions in the United States, the term "multiculturalism" is suspect. However, like any number of other "isms", it means different things to different people. So much the better for the ICLA, I felt, that it structured its conference around a theme that, although held in disrepute in academic circles in the United States, could evoke positive connotations elsewhere. American trends, at least, were not going to dominate this conference. In the States, "multiculturalism" has become a buzzword for university administrators. It is pregnant with connotations that are politically advantageous to bureaucratic structures that court an image of diversity. I was curious what it meant in other academic contexts. I learned from the ICLA Conference that, although not a term of derision abroad, the meaning of multiculturalism was equally vague in other settings, suggesting often nothing more than diversity.

My animus against multiculturalism stems from its institutionalization in the United States. Universities here have recently discovered the value of teaching something constructed as "multiculturalism." The inherent virtue of multiculturalism resides in its appeal to novelty and relevancy. Multiculturalism, as it is practiced in institutions of higher learning, also feeds the intellectual's need for engagement and the pretense that academia criticism can function as a political act. Activist culture, it appears, can be displaced by a textual culture. However, the chimera of institutionalized multiculturalism poses a significant threat to the discipline of Comparative Literature and the teaching of world literature. It has taken over the activity of comparative analyses between cultures and literatures and á has achieved this important in venues that preempt the traditional role of Comparative Literature. Beyond the rank cynicism that often informs initiatives in relevancy - grounded as they are in the market-based consumerism that has come to define academe - is the very fact that those sites that currently practice multiculturalism, national

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language departments and humanities institutes, are often unsuited to the task that they have assumed. In the case of national language departments, they lack the vision to look beyond their cherished insularity. From a need to survive, it is necessary to vie for the coveted position as campus spokespersons for theory and diversity. Since national literature departments are not known for their heterogeneity, they find it difficult to reflect institutional mandates for diversity. They can compensate, however, by placing within their curriculum courses that deal with theories of subalternity and Otherness. When popular theoretical trends coincide with a national literature department's language of expertise, the unit benefits from the ability to read the relevant theory in the original with, ideally, an understanding of the cultural and intellectual context in which the criticism arose. However, this happy situation is rarely the case. Humanities institutes, centers, or programs fare better. They can easily function as cross-cultural conglomerates (and I use the term intentionally to highlight the marketing aspect of such endeavors).

Marketing in this context is twofold. First, there is marketing to and through university administrators and deans who buy into the idea of the multicultural initiative as the most advanced and "logical" approach to the Third World and the miasma of competing ethnicities. It assuages institutional needs to recruit and "restructure" with cutting edge responses to new socio-economic realities. Second, the multicultural context allows individual academics to emerge as luminaries in the theoretical/critical pantheon: they then market themselves as theoretical stars and the university markets them, in turn, to attract students and grant money.

National literature departments can focus on theory, although they struggle to deal with diversity. Humanities programs tend to lack linguistic and intellectual background knowledge. They apply theory to texts with little care for the national historical situation and exegetical context. Most importantly, however, national literature programs and humanities institutes are not equipped with the methodology or inclination to do comparative work. This has not prevented them from usurping the role and function of Comparative Literature on many campuses across the nation.

In contrast to Comparative Literature, those units that have abrogated its traditional role read the world in translation. In the case of humanities institutes, the study of language is of little significance. In national literature departments, the application of some theoretical trend becomes the "language" of communication. As someone whose work touches upon the field of Asian studies, I am concerned with how the Third World enters into this vision of multiculturalism. In the past decade, I have worked in three comparative

literature departments with Ph.D. programs, all large state institutions, one in the East, one in the Midwest and one in the South. In the following pages, I would like to discuss very briefly how the drama of multiculturalism has impacted upon the teaching of world literature within Comparative Literature at these various sites.

Ten years ago at an institution in the SUNY system, Comparative Literature was on very shaky ground, housed in a department that encompassed other small units as logical as Classics and as heteroclitic as Religion, Korean Buddhism, and Talmudic Studies. What concern existed for texts, eroded with the establishment of a well-funded humanities institute whose superhumanist was a music video scholar. Textuality was never completely lost, however. It appeared in discussions of canonicity whose referents consisted of comic books, jazz reprint liner notes and *Penthouse* letters to the editor. Given poststructuralism's redefinition of culture as text, cultural studies allowed tenured literature professors to teach anything that could be read and value it as a legitimate part of the canon.

But, even before such innovative initiatives, texts that were taught and read were usually those evoked by theory. I learned early on that academics who advocate difference on the level of abstraction, often obliterate difference in practice or assign meaning to those authors and works that fulfill most completely their theoretical expectations. So we had a department where the students knew those texts that most easily lent themselves to the theory they (or rather their professors) favored. Students had little comprehensive knowledge of literary canons, eastern or western. But, there was a veritable cottage industry in Derridean readings of Mallarmé, Rilke and Lao Tse.

I then moved to the University of Illinois to assume a post in a department that four days later was slated for reconfiguration. Here, the situation was a bit more complex, yet not foreign to many Comparative Literature departments. An immense English Department, closely linked with an administration consisting primarily of scientists, decided that they should be the spokespersons of theory and multiculturalism on campus. High-profile professors who happened to be monolingualists spoke publicly in national fora of Illinois taxpayers' money being used to fund "too many foreigners." There was a vote to disband Comparative Literature. Over a period of four years, the administration vacillated. Because Comparative Literature was deemed a "boutique" department, there was talk of incorporating it within a larger department. No one would have us because we were thought to be overly concerned with texts and aesthetics. Comparative Literature continues to exist at Illinois as an independent unit with only two of its core faculty remaining. It is in the process of being resuscitated with new Tines whose allegiances are shared with other

departments. A humanities institute was also formed to deal with theory-in-translation and the next crop of "isms." The irony is that Illinois had in place a fine Comparative Literature Department that was cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. Its commitment to comparison, exegesis and linguistic competency fostered multiculturalism far better than any institutional mandate where diversity is encoded in new structures, but where comparative analysis may no longer be the highest priority. I am currently based at the University of Georgia, whose department of Comparative Literature has fifteen full lines and a curriculum that, in addition to teaching the regular courses in Comparative Literature and theory, teaches language and literature courses in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Zulu, Yoruba, Swahili and Hindi. Comparative Literature at Georgia is a department that truly has the potential to deal with the globe more responsibly than most Comparative Literature Departments. However, a curious situation has arisen that has rendered this Department and the teaching of world literature useless to the undergraduate population.

In Georgia, we have what a colleague of mine has termed the meeting of two incommensurables. There was a university mandate demanding courses in cultural diversity. This mandate could either be read in a narrow sense (domestic diversity) or broadly (i.e., globalism). On the university level, those wanting the narrow focus lost this debate. At the college level, however, cultural diversity was understood as multiculturalism and multiculturalism was provincially defined as domestic. The level of the discussion was not particularly sophisticated. Those who favored an international focus were accused of working a racially motivated end-run. Given Georgia's history, this rhetoric was effective. The practical effects at the college level are as follows: 50% or more of the readings in all Comparative Literature courses must deal with non-English and non-American literature (to distinguish us from the English Department). To meet the multicultural requirement, most of the course material must be American ethnic literature. While any number of English literature courses can fulfill the undergraduate core and multi-cultural requirements, world literature courses by definition cannot. As in many departments, our world literature courses provide the needed FTE's and TA'ships for our graduate students. When they are empty, we lose our *raison d'être*. As Head, am I to write Georgia parents promising that their children have less of a chance becoming neo-Nazis if they read Wole Soyinka instead of Alice Walker? What began as an attempt to combat the existence and/or perception of endemic racism has resulted in defining globalism within the narrow focus of the American ethnic experience. The motive was probably sincere. In its institutionalization, it became exclusionary. Georgia provides an excellent case study for

how words such as multiculturalism and globalism take on a life of their own within the university environment.

Let me try and draw some meaningful conclusions regarding the teaching of world literature from my experiences in these demographically representative Comparative Literature departments. Over the last decade, there has been a tendency to transform all cultural objects, whether they be high or low, into popular culture. To give this phenomenon a more aesthetic formulation: kitsch triumphed. Or to formulate the matter in theoretical terms: there was a paradigm shift from the textual to the cultural. This shift was facilitated by the theoretical assumption that everything really is a text, especially all forms of cultural activity, even escapist forms of diversion. The radicalization of theory also impacted significantly upon this paradigm shift: one could reject literature as an outmoded form of cultural capital belonging to the bourgeoisie. However, the rejection of literature in favor of cultural studies had less to do with installing a more immediate and less conservative hierarchical format and more to do with an ideological need to seek self-validation by identifying with the victims of repression on a global basis. The human need to exoticize (or aestheticize) individual experience can be poignant, except when it becomes a profession.

How does the Third World become configured within this schema? In many American universities, the Third World exists under the rubric of postcolonial literatures and these are dealt with under the umbrella of multiculturalism. However, postcolonial studies and multiculturalism actually have little to do with Third World reality. Rhetorical engagement only masquerades as a blueprint for social change. Critics spend little or no time near the native sites they purport to analyze and are often bereft of the essential tools with which to study those sites. Stripped of cultural specificity, one colonial experience can come to resemble another. In a multicultural context, these sites ideally would be indistinguishable. History can then be divided into manageable and isolated segments based on the experience of modern colonialism, while at the same time arguing against the false essentialism. Such fragmentary and a-contextual representations are accepted out of a deep cynicism regarding the Other as a fossilized object of clinical experimentation. Westerners/Western trained and -based Third World elites dominate the discourse; their language is based upon Western epistemes and their knowledge of the national literature or historical context is usually that of an individual who has trained in English literature and 20th-century critical theory. What passes for a canon almost exclusively focuses on English texts, as if these were truly representative of the postcolonial situation, ignoring

(*pace* Spivak's Mahesweta Devi) vernacular texts that might not deal with colonialism. This has made for a rather discredited form of scholarship and canon formation. Imagine how ludicrous it becomes when world literature thus packaged has come to satisfy a university's mandate for diversity.

The Third World is, thus, bracketed before the argument begins. The critic's primary interest lies in structuring the Third World thematically for a milieu that consumes these structures. Again we have the meeting of incommensurables - a deep seated need for the experience of political engagement coming out of the 1960's meeting a 1990's need to be media savvy, to package and market intellectual capital. There is no small irony here, in how easily these two conceptual frameworks have melded. If the belief in criticism as a viable intervention is a relic of the 60's that has proven itself bankrupt, then the whole critical project functions as nothing but an investigation of socio-political impotence. Where does potency lie? It resides in the critic's relationship to colleagues and in the coining and usage of jargon. The dexterity of language manipulation becomes an exercise in pyrotechnics garnering the critic points in a rarefied linguistic game. Theory, understood as symbolic capital and combined with spokespersonship, becomes even more a form of professional empowerment. The chimera of multiculturalism has allowed the critic to appear relevant on a global level. The real world and the variety of its literatures are eclipsed by this larger form of professional hegemonic project.

Although Goethe's call to form a *Weltliteratur* and enrich one's own culture through the acknowledgment of other models of artistic expression has passed out of favor, we should not forget that the discipline of Comparative Literature was formed from a cosmopolitan desire to embrace diversity. Our field 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 deep cynicism of multiculturalism as envisioned in American universities today. The teaching of world literature, packaged as multiculturalism, has become a pawn in the hands of a cadre of cynical professors and administrators seeking legitimacy for the political engagement they never quite achieved in more propitious times.

Contrary to what World Literature classes, multicultural initiatives, and theories of alterity might suggest, the Third World defies packaging. It remains the inassimilable welter of incommensurabilities that one finds in the high-tech consultancies and spice emporia on the Buford Highway in Atlanta and Northern Boulevard in Queens. This clash of technological innovation with prosaic reality produces a chaos that cannot be

homogenized or coated with a theoretical veneer. Until we as scholars realize that we should not play at being "victims by proxy" (to cite the critic Deepika Bahri), or *fin de siècle* exotics; until we grasp that the Other cannot be consumed on the cheap, we have nothing to offer our students. Inevitably, the verities of the moment in multicultural studies will be discredited and young scholars touting new "isms" will step in to fill the void. What concerns me is that this new round of relevancy is, perhaps, the only essential point in the game.