

# COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: CAN THIS MARRIAGE BE SAVED?<sup>1</sup>

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**420** 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, including religion, myths, anthropology, folklore, French literature, the Classics, and Indian philosophy. 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 that, unlike so many other fields, CL was not dogmatic. One could really do whatever one wanted, as long as one did it seriously. In the 1980s, CL was the place to go to be your own person.

Because I was slightly more mature, I approached this relationship in a more discriminating manner. I had known other loves and tried to keep a level head about me in this new romance. I particularly kept my eyes open for any hint of betrayal. Indeed, as time went on, my initial infatuation dwindled as CL flirted unabashedly with so many theories. However, 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 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 what follows, I hope to outline my observations of 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 1970s, many scholars began to view literature as an outmoded form of cultural capital belonging to the bourgeoisie. An important stage in this process of radicalization involved the rejection of the canon of dead white males

in favour 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<sup>2</sup> 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 (WL). 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 1970s in the United 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, and 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, but was less successful 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 Eurocentrism, a number of critics were not convinced that it did. 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 in which they were truly underrepresented, 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 American academia, but were managed, or directed, toward fields that showcased their ethnicity, so universities could use one minority placement to make two political statements. Universities could both show their commitment to diversity hiring and flaunt their promotion of minority studies.<sup>3</sup> Although some multiculturalists in theory saw themselves as "border-crossers or even cultural workers" (Giroux 21), in

practice they 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 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 correctly claimed that African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and others have made central contributions to American culture. In most institutions, however, 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 multiplicity (San Juan, *Hegemony* 223). It revised the image of the US as a melting pot into America as a salad that is now not only colourful and beautiful, but more easily consumable. This transformation raises the question: “Who was the intended consumer?” (Davis 45).

The institutionalization of MC within US academia replicates that of corporate-level structures, since universities are also corporations (Lubiano 70). 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 relations.<sup>4</sup> The corporate model of disciplining diversity as a strategy for more control of workers (Davis 41) does not attempt to assimilate diversity into the dominant culture. Rather, it digests unassimilated diversity with the same results as if homogeneity prevailed. The main 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. Thus, 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 levelling out of difference, MC purported to offer representations of neglected groups, when in fact it merely provided the illusion of some liberal reform that did not actually exist.

As in the case of MC, postcolonial criticism (PC)<sup>5</sup> 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*,<sup>6</sup> its ahistoricity, and its universalizing deployments (Shohat 99). Somehow, claiming that PC “covers all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al. 2), or that it “foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle” (Mishra and Hodge 399) 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 criti-

cal 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, the assumption was that, as in the case of MC, there was some common experience that all these cultures shared, rooted in the time when "they all emerged from the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with imperial power" (Ashcroft et al. 2), and that this condition could now be called postcoloniality. Significantly, PC, like MC, did not demand knowledge of languages beyond English, although French texts were sometimes included.

There was also something "prematurely congratulatory" (McClintock 87) about the claim of PC 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 published texts, mostly in English, as if these were totally representative of the postcolonial situation. Vernacular texts and literatures 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 the 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 the exegetical context of any text that was analyzed.

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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 PC claimed to problematize the binaries of Western historicism (McClintock 85), the multitudinous cultures of the world seemed to critics to be marked and marketed in postcolonial theory (just as was the case in MC) with their geopolitical distinctions telescoped into invisibility (McClintock 86). 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 projects (Bahri 52). Acontextual and fragmentary analyses were accepted out of a deep cynicism that regarded the Other as a fossilized object of clinical experimentation. Indiscriminately embracing the Other also risked levelling 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 PC exhibited an uncritical primitivism that privileged non-Western culture and gloried in its presumptive, eventual, and—this is important—always revolutionary, resurgence (Clark 44). As we shall see, such orientalist presumptions continue to operate today.

Like MC, PC 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 constraints (Fluck 216). What is curiously missing from both MC and PC is any serious questioning of how the appearance of the text 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. Such a critical stance allows a privileged class of academics the possibility of forging a wide-ranging identification with the marginalized Other. What is at work here is 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" (Ahmad 1). Regardless of their own socioeconomic 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" (73).

424 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's 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, Transgender Studies, Handicapped Studies, Fat Studies, White Male Studies, to name a few such 'disciplines.' In many of these purported sub-fields, 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 in which a text is 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, Transgender, White Male, etc.). Thus, 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, such as 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 as the disseminator of the world's literary production. In other words, this trend has brought us to American World Literature (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 Bloc, 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, language training in the US, which was already in decline, diminished further, and English eclipsed French as the academic *lingua franca*. The rebooted American WL, to use a phrase coined by Gerald Gillespie, 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 had 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 are actually "represented" in this American WL world.<sup>7</sup> The political bent of American WL is explicit. It aims to right the presumed Eurocentric and non-Western wrongs 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 that has tried, particularly in Europe and in India, to replace CL.

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As noted at the beginning of this essay, CS also came into being as a discipline during the academic identity and culture wars of the 1970s and 1980s. 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 (Bal 30), 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 fuelled 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 (see Radhakrishnan). British CS was essentially engaged in the moral re-evaluation of modern society, and was loyal to a radical line of political action seeking social reconstruction. It endeavoured to stretch investigation to include education and business management practices, specific areas in which issues of class, gender, or race hide as much as possible their relationship to economic and political differences. When it crossed the pond, CS followed the Socialist orientation of the British variety. It offered a liberal and pluralistic perspective that tended to interpret cultural production primarily in terms of capitalist exploitation. However, once transplanted into the US, CS focused primarily on popular culture, those forms of representation beyond traditional literary works yet nevertheless analyzed as alternative forms of textuality. It made considerable inroads, but did not take over literary studies; it still remains a not-too-minor player, combining with CL depart-

ments 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 Anglocentric, and largely succeeding. In fact, in India, CL is taught as if it were CS. This trend reflects the English proclivities of CL in India and the absence of adequate teaching of Indian 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 a 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.

American WL 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, 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 PC in that, according to its chief proponent in the US, David Damrosch, it promotes recognition, equal opportunity, and tolerance.<sup>9</sup> But, the projects of Area Studies, the progenitor of MC, PC, and American WL are all remarkably the same: The West still interprets the rest. These pedagogies, all claiming to be bringing literatures and cultural productions from the margins to the centre, really seem mainly to allow critics from the centre and scholars of English-language literatures (both in the East and West) to co-opt the margins.

Although the rebooted American 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, and 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 times (Chanda, “Comparative Literature/World Literature” 7). America’s reframing of WL through translation reflects far more the critic’s, but not necessarily the translator’s, framing through his/her hegemonic language rather than that of the local language’s writer (Chanda, “Comparative Literature/World Literature” 3). 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. The translator makes English what is not English. It is a one-way street: the ensuing English text does not become changed by the experience of the encounter. Rather, the Other becomes changed. In terms reminiscent of Herder’s 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 a 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 (see Figueira 29). 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 idiom (Figueira 31). 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.<sup>10</sup> But, as inadequate as the rebooted American WL may appear to the comparatist, it pales, politically at least, to one of the Chinese formulations.

I qualify WL as American to distinguish it from its permutations elsewhere in the world. Europe has 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. Then, there is a Chinese version of WL, which often appears as World Literatures, and whose primary institution is the International Association of Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC), with two journals, *The Forum for World Literature*, published at Purdue University in Indiana, and *Foreign Literary Studies*, published in China. The IAELC was founded in 2012 by Professor Nie



Zhanzhao, expressly as a counterweight to Western literary studies and its focus on linguistic and formalistic research such as narratology, and sociological approaches such as discourses on power relations, postcolonialism, gender studies, and feminism, which were thought to impede the contributions of non-Western original points of view. The IAELC promotes theorizing that is not Western-centric and based on the work of those peripheries which do not imitate the centre. Its thesis, not an unreasonable one, is that there is a deficit of ethical engagement in Western theory, but its remedy for this very real problem is quite curious. Its principal theorist claims that the main function of literature is moral judgement, and that such morality is not the purview of the critic but 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 and American literature—should contextualize the taboos formed by human rationality as opposed to emotions, primarily free will, which are seen as primitive.<sup>11</sup> In short, ELC imposes a rigid and strict function on our reading of literature, demanding our submission to some transindividual ethical power.

What is fascinating about this Chinese vision of WL is the manner in which it is actively propagated abroad through journals—even the one published in the American Midwest—as well as international conferences and cooperative relationships.<sup>12</sup> While theoretical schools in the West are playing identity games, the Chinese have come in 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 of 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 message of an ideological marketing of an “Eastern” alternative to CL which was, as the editors noted, “quasi-dictatorial” (1) in focus.

The Western literary theories and pedagogies outlined in this paper focus on post-modernist concerns, such as hybridized and syncretic views of the modern world, rather than economic and political forces. 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 this 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 levelling out of the world has contributed to the aforementioned theoretical and pedagogical formulations of the margins, metaphorical spaces 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. When critics appropriate the metaphorical space of the margin, they 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, both Eastern and Western, examined here, and 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. In the US, university administrators were willing to comply with such new and supposedly cutting-edge initiatives because they absolved them from having to take on in any real way issues of race and inequality that are still rampant in many institutions today. The variously ethnically inflected programs were ancillary resources in American Studies programs, but pretended to be brilliant new high-level CL. Since these pedagogies of the Other were embedded in English departments, there was never an issue of appropriate “identity” courses developed on the level of CL. As Gerald Gillespie has noted,<sup>13</sup> no one, neither students nor administrators, wanted anything quite so sophisticated. One could offer a course in which students could examine how Japanese-Americans felt about their lives in the US, but courses contrasting their experiences in various languages and literary works to those of diasporic Japanese (newcomers or their descendants) throughout the world, or examining their cultural production against the peer generation at home in Japan, were not desirable. It was in the interest of lazy students and cynical administrators that the Other be consumed on the cheap, so we ended up with the aforementioned watered-down pedagogies I examine here. As I noted, these were all creations of English departments intending to co-opt the territories of other humanities programs, such as national literatures and CL as well as the social sciences, without really employing the rigours of such things as sociology or anthropology. English departments were used to such colonizations, as they had earlier co-opted theory, read in snippets in translated anthologies; now they were trying to ape the scientists, the only people valued in the corporate university.

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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 1990s need to be media savvy, to package and market intellectual capital, and a 2000s option of taking the project globally. 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 1960s that has proven itself bankrupt, which I think it has, we might want to view all these purportedly cutting-edge pedagogies as ventures in sociopolitical impotence. Potency, when it exists, resides in the critics’ relationship to colleagues as it is constructed through the coinage and use of jargon, their postures as public intellectuals, their collaborations with university administrators and academic or trade publishers, and their exportation/exploitation of the commodity they market.

In American institutions today, intellectual endeavours 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 PC 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 Colours of Benetton pluralism (Shohat and Stam 6). Then, initiatives such as WL, as do/did MC and PC, market themselves as cutting-edge forms of “restructuring” purporting to offer radical responses to new socioeconomic realities.

The practical reason for all this packaging of alterity, whether it be 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  
**430** American students. In fact, one of the explicit reasons for WL, as formulated 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 declines in learning and standards beginning in the 1960s. WL’s solution to these lower standards is to universalize them.<sup>14</sup> Pedagogies such as MC, PC, and now WL allow texts to preserve their own heritage, as long as that heritage speaks English (Prashad 112). Such pedagogies also feed American isolationism. WL’s levelling 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 languages. Optimally, comparatists can seek employment in CL or any of their languages and/or 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.<sup>15</sup> As an ancilliary 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.

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, such as national literatures in the case of WL, and philosophy, anthropology, sociology, or psychology in the case of CS, WL and CS shove aside experts in this process of colonization. In this manner, American WL can be seen as a globalized form of CS.

The result of this levelling out of expertise is the vitiation of faculty competence and range. Essential courses are replaced with fad courses that 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.

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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 and recognition from Anglophone white culture and use the language of that culture to produce itself (Rizvi 63). 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 difference (Chow 113). 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 capital (Chanda, “PostWorld Literature” 7). 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 peda-

gogies of the Other (identity studies, MC, PC, 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, and 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 underrepresented ethnics. Granted, this 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 Ahmad, under the guise of studying colonialisms of the past, we facilitate imperialisms of the present (222). 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 both from the minorities still based in identity studies, and from 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. I ask you, however, what is more exclusionary and elitist than practicing a brand of criticism that claims to champion a voiceless and underrepresented 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 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, but only points to American cultural provincialism, triumphalism, and a deep indifference to the world. It may even reflect a little bit of racism.

With CL becoming 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 (which might be seen to liven up the marriage) and its flirtations with other disciplines (which does cause us some embarrassment in the face of experts in those fields CS ape); but did we really sign up for this level of deception and inauthenticity? 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 labour market (San Juan, *Racial Formations* 4). 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 dignity (San Juan, *Racial Formations* 138). 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 that 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 products packaged and marketed by the self-serving managers of American academia.

## NOTES

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1. Portions of this paper will appear in *Comparative Literature as a Critical Approach/La littérature compare comme approche critique*, edited by Anne Tomiche, forthcoming in 2017.
2. Throughout this essay, I use the term “American” to denote the US experiences of these trends.
3. In fact, one could be considered ‘uppity’ as a minority if one dared to specialize in something one was not genetically predisposed to find interesting. I was asked many times in job interviews if my specialization was liberation theology rather than Hinduism, simply because the interviewer could not pronounce my name.
4. David Rieff has argued that the treasured catchphrases of multiculturalism—“cultural diversity,” “differences,” or 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” (Jacoby 123).
5. The pun of abbreviating “postcolonial criticism” as “PC,” an abbreviation also used to denote “politically correct,” is intentional.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. Personal conversation with Ipshita Chanda.
9. David Damrosch, Keynote Address, American Comparative Literature Association, 2011.
10. Transnational Literature, an Irish and Australian variant of WL, seems to recognize this lack of interest in the issue of translation and attempts to remedy it by reading the world in translation, but acknowledging issues of translation theory.
11. See Nie; for a Western interpretation of ELC, see Talvet.
12. In 2017, the ELC met in Tartu, Estonia, and plans to meet at the University of London in 2018. The Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association is scheduled for Shenzhen in 2019, for which the Chinese hosts proposed the theme of WL. It will be interesting to see how CL is done there.

13. Personal discussion with Gerald Gillespie.
14. Personal discussion with Gerald Gillespie.
15. Personal discussion with Gerald Gillespie.

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