

Literary Studies, Multiculturalism, and Corporate Practicality

In answering the editors' request for a contribution to this special issue, one experiences a strong sense of vertigo ("the future") and the anxiety of acceding to the preferred length (the shorter the better). I have been asked specifically to comment upon possible futures for literary studies in a multiracial, multicultural society; I will further restrict my comments to the case of the United States. Even a cursory sampling of articles, essays, and speeches on "multiculturalism" which circulate within various national spheres discloses how little overlap there is, in the particular signifying practices of multiculturalism in different national contexts. Despite the fact that there is a general, liberal, antiracist, pluralistic sentiment behind it in each case, it is certain that the term is used toward very particular, strategic goals. In particular, for our purposes here, the means by which "culture" in such a setting contributes to the formation of social subjects differs with each specific national case.

In this understanding of culture as performing certain social functions, literature becomes one case among many. But it is an extremely important one, as it is arguably the primary cultural object in the university curriculum. No other form of "high culture" can claim such a central place in the university. I do not intend to rehearse the current debates over culture commonly called in the United States, the "culture wars." Rather, I do wish to approach the question of the future of literary studies by way of a discussion of how the social functions of literature within the American university take place within a specific historical context. It is interesting that the question we are asked to address in this volume, the "Future of Literary Studies," immediately limits our inquiry to a highly specialized professional and pre-professional class which performs a particular act upon literature — we do not ask what the future of literature may be, for we assume the role of necessary custodians and disseminators; we do not assume this function to take place outside the university. Therefore it seems only reasonable to begin to approach the question of the future of literary studies by considering the interrelationship between these studies, the cultural role they play in society, and the institutions which provide the site for the study of literature.

My sense is that the "future" of literary studies in the United States has less to do with the "culture wars" than with the changing structure and function of the American university, a change that may be tracked from the late 1950's. While it is entirely proper and important to regard the culture wars as incubating in the era of decolonization, of three worlds theory, of

domestic civil and women's rights and anti-war movements (emanating from the question of agency and voice and empowerment), we note as well that this was precisely the era of both the space program and the Cold War. Along with progressive, utopian political discourse there evolved a discourse of practical knowledge. American research universities were well funded by a government which saw the university as a crucial training and research institution. For example, the idea of "practical knowledge" became oriented toward national defence, and foreign language studies were funded by National Defense and Foreign Language Area Studies programs, whose nomenclature reflected the ends to which foreign language learning was to be put. Linguistics departments received defence money to probe the possibility of computer and robotic applications of natural language laws. In this era the idea of technology should not be confined to hardware issues alone, but rather seen against the backdrop of a general sense that the *newtechnai* could change the very fabric of life — I think of pharmaceuticals, chemical engineering, and surgical procedures (for example, plastic surgery, which burgeoned after the Korean War) as one other set of practices that presumed to reshape the rhythm and nature of everyday life.

In this age the study of literature was, not accidentally, formalistic. In the midst of rapid global change, the tendency was to isolate and analyze objects in discrete and highly predictable ways — the issue was to generate the tools proper to the definition of "literariness." Yet this isolating aesthetic was considered to be eminently humanistic even as (or *because*) it wrote out the economic, the biological, the historical, etc., in other words, the particulars that intruded upon its universal aesthetic claim (or, under structuralism, the claim of a "science of the text"). It was into such a field that Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, New Historicism, queer theory, ethnic and cultural studies intruded. As different as each of these is from the other, all regarded as necessary an intervention in the status quo, particularly in the isolation of the text from issues of material history and power. This intrusion is seen by many to jeopardize, or even kill off, the life of literature itself, as literature was reduced to simply one "text" among many.

The field today is variously occupied by adherents to these orientations, old and new, yet the future does not belong to any one of them exclusively. Rather, they/we all face a "movement" of more import and longevity than any other, one which began at least as early as the post-war era we have just been discussing — that of the corporate university. Even public universities are now intimately linked to a value-added, "service" ideology. In this scenario, consumers (i.e., parents and students) want to see results (not in terms of the production of "learned" individuals, but in terms of job placement); investors (boards of trustees) want to see a balanced budget or preferably a margin of profit. The main goal is to disseminate information as quickly and as efficiently

as possible, even if it means that the student views his teacher through a computer screen.

For the future of literary studies this means larger and larger classes until there are gradually more and more virtual classrooms (made possible by advances in telecommunications and computer technologies). The effect of this material transformation of the pedagogical scene on literary studies will mean less and less dialogue, inquiry, criticism, and more and more formulaic methods and responses. In this context, we can understand the current phenomenon of more and more classes taught by non-tenure track, part-time adjunct lecturers. The justification is certainly economic, but supporting this movement will also be the basic belief that literary studies can be done *en masse* by faculty detached from the actual running of the university, without a long-standing commitment to the development of the intellectual life of the institution (which is only reasonable, as they are treated like so much dispensable migrant labour), who bring certain essential journeyman skills to the teaching of literature but not necessarily much more.

Of the double imperatives of nation-based study and internationalism, the former will lose out, again, under the imperative of "relevance" and practicality. This will result in the downsizing of discrete national literature departments into "boards" or, even, programmes in literary studies. In this condition comparative literature departments will do very well, but will constantly be fighting to preserve intellectual goals against both administrative edicts to service students and the resentment of national literature types (including English professors) who are now drawn into the circle.

Now what does this mean for multiculturalism? Given the dismal picture painted above, one could easily say that multiculturalism is a luxury at best, and hindrance and death blow to literary studies at worst. But if the future of literary studies is intimately related to the institutional structures in which they take place, then we have to assume that the nature of literary inquiry and pedagogy will reflect the role culture is to play in the university. And that question, I argue, is linked to the way the university seeks to accommodate an increasingly heterogeneous student population that is its clientele.

Formerly, the strategy was to represent the university as the dispenser of cultural capital — the degree was a certificate of membership in cultural hegemony, and, coincidentally, the mark of the erasure of race or class specific identity. One's graduation authenticated one's ascension into the world of liberal, universal cultural citizenship. Yet today, while that ideology is clearly still undergirding liberal education, there is both the downgrading of "culture" as a valued commodity and the rise of practical skills — skills which forgo the messy ruminations of what counts as "humane" and go directly toward material well-being.

Nevertheless, with the rupture of traditional valuations of culture comes

the opening of the possibility of a multicultural critique that is not simply the feel-good, retooled liberal pluralism of the past, which inevitably resulted in the reinstatement of a normative culture. The valorisation of "practical knowledge" has created a space for multiculturalism: it plays a large part in personnel management and race studies. Some understanding of multiculturalism is regarded as necessary to the smooth running of both corporations and society.¹ Yet the promotion of multiculturalism in this guise has not foreclosed its original contestatory goals: the discourse of practicality that has attempted to exploit progressive multiculturalism has not precluded debate over the term. At many American universities, multiculturalism has been manifested as an on-going debate on several fronts: the historical invention and perpetuation of monoculture with universal culture; the ideological function of "culture"; cultural nationalism and identity politics; communitarian values in the age of postmodernism; gender politics. But as "literary studies" have been opened up to what were deemed "extra-literary" issues, as multiculturalism has suggested the ways literature is an ideological formation that forces us to rethink certain nation-bound assumptions, we hear fears that the formal specificity of literature has been left behind.

This does not necessarily have to be the case.

There is no contradiction between opening the study of literature to the extra-literary and a meticulous analysis of verbal art. A critical multicultural literary study would do both. The key difference is in not assuming (or projecting) the necessary value of verbal art for its own sake. Rather, our aesthetic criteria are located within historical formations and social functionality (Bourdieu's discussion of the "field of cultural production" is one example of how one might carry on such a study). As I have written elsewhere, multiculturalism "explores the fissures, tensions, and sometimes contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively. It instead maps out the terrain of common interest while being attentive to the different angles of entry into this terrain" ("Critical Introduction," 5).

To sum up: the future of literary studies is to be determined within a future that is historically specific and in which we already participate. We must factor in these elements: an increasingly heterogeneous student population that the university wishes to serve; the dual values of cultural and pragmatic knowledge; the economic realities that make the more easily dispensable and more immediately practically efficient "knowledge" the most

1 I explore these themes in my "Critical Introduction" to my anthology; see Palumbo-Liu.

likely to be supported and promoted; the abiding political awareness that was opened up in the 60s and 70s as to the ideological aspects of culture. Given all this, there are two "futures" that seem most likely. Both would take place under the condition of the collapse of national literature departments into general "literature" departments (and perhaps even into more amorphous "humanities" departments). In the first scenario, literary studies consists of little or no literary history and a great deal of thematic, universalizing studies which easily are dispensable and reproduced; in the second, which is certainly my preference, literary studies includes a careful analysis of literary discourse, its historical constitution and social functions, a widening of literary culture beyond the eurocentric norms, and a concomitant widening of our understanding of how the literary expression of multiple, minoritized cultures have been historically constituted and the social functions they perform.

For literary studies to survive, it must both rationalize its existence beyond the old and assumed value of literature as culture and resist the pull of fast-knowledge, quick-consumption education. The only way to do this is to stress both the practicality of a humanity education that addresses human issues that are truly universal: alongside those with which we are familiar we must include those of social justice as it involves issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and class; and the specific modalities in which literary texts exist as particular articulations of such issues.

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The Digital Literary: Electronic Phrases for the Post-Gutenberg Age

The Mad Literary Critic. Have you not heard of that mad literary critic who booted up his computer in the bright morning hours, logged on to the Internet, and sent repeated e-mail messages to an electronic chat room: "I seek Print! I seek Print!" — As many of those who did not believe in Print were engaging in electronic dialogue just then, he provoked much laughter. "Whither is Print?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed it* — you and I. We are all the murderers of Print. But how did we do this? What were we doing when we unchained Literature from Print? Whither is Literature moving now? Is it not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is Literature still literary once it has entered the Digital Zone? Is it not becoming Other? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the technological gravediggers who are burying Print? Print is dead. Print remains dead. And we have killed it."¹

In the Late Age of Print: The Emergence of the Post-Gutenberg. Though one could debate interminably the relative degrees of impact that "post-discourses" have made on the disciplinary networks associated with the field of literature, one "post"-formation which has already begun to alter radically the very materiality of the literary, as well as transform the apparatus of production, distribution, and reception of "literature" in the post-hermeneutic age, is the post-Gutenberg advent of the digital literary. Given the explosion of literary activity on the World Wide Web (WWW) in the form of virtual libraries, hypertextual e-texts, and literary e-zines, not to mention the steady proliferation of literary texts in CD-ROM format, we are clearly witnessing the digitization of literature—the emergence of the digital literary. No "post"-ism promises to alter the very materialities of literature and literary study more than the post-Gutenberg. Although reports of the death of the codex book have been greatly exaggerated, "it isn't likely to remain the dominant means of textual dissemination," according to John Tolva, even if the book does not altogether disappear. What happens to "literature" and the "literary" once the dominant technology of inscription for the selection, storage, and processing of textual data becomes digital? In the post-Gutenberg age, how will the becoming-digital of literature bring about a transformation in the modes of being, communication, subjectivity, signification, and power associated with the literary apparatus? Will the digital revolution prove to be as far-reaching in its consequences as the invention of the printing press?