

**"Hauntings by Otherness":
Theory's Home, Post-Colonial
Displacements, and the Future
of Comparative Literature**

At the 1995 Learned Societies Conference of Canada, held at the Université de Québec à Montréal, I, as a comparatively recent immigrant to Canada, was a somewhat bemused observer at the panel session on the future of Comparative Literature. The line-up included Peter Brooks, Richard Cavell, Linda Hutcheon, and Walter Moser. My notes were not detailed enough to recover their specific comments so the following observations represent the broad brush strokes of an imperfect memory and are of course coloured by my own investments and institutional history (the papers of the panel and other articles on Comparative Literature are scheduled to appear in this journal, see Dimić and Tötösy).

The consistent reference point for the discussion throughout was the Charles Bernheimer report, contained in "Three Reports to the American Comparative Literature Association," recently released together with a variety of comments including those by Peter Brooks. What was at stake here? Unlike Australia, my former home, Comparative Literature in Canada sees itself historically as the

**Post-Colonialities: The "Other,"
the System, and a Personal
Perspective, or, This (Too) Is
Comparative Literature**

For a working hypothesis, I prefer to use the centre/periphery approach for the study of post-colonial literatures. The centre/periphery approach is, in my opinion, well-suited to explicate the basis of the question of colonialism and post-colonialism because the power/non-power paradigm is an either-or approach while an approach considering the relationships between centre and periphery allows for a more levelled and mediated view of the question. For example, the situation of women which, on the one hand, is a clear power/non-power configuration at least as far as a (constructed) structural organization of human interaction is concerned, could also be viewed as a constructed organization (see Schmidt 1994) of centre and periphery inter-relationships. In the study of literature, this approach allows to account for the wide variety of women's situations as represented in both the literary text and in the literary system: a self-referential (semi-permeable) subsystem of communicative social interaction (see Schmidt 1982; Tötösy 1992).

disciplinary "home" of "theory" in its structuralist and post-structuralist manifestations.

In Australia, on the other hand, it was Philosophy which had generated these speculations before they migrated and transmuted (far more pervasively than here) into Cultural Studies.

The panel speakers and their interlocutors registered anxieties concerning the encroachment of Cultural Studies on the one hand and the imperial designs of English Departments on the other. English was represented as having been recently inoculated with "theory" in the form of post-colonialism — although one could debate the degree to which "poco" has really either politicised or theorised traditional approaches in English Departments across Canada — and was now actively promoting Cultural Studies which is seen as the privileged new area offering innovation and interrogation of outmoded orthodoxies.

The Bernheimer report in turn makes interesting reading. It too is permeated by anxieties, the primary stake being that Comparative Literature should retain its privileged position in relation to incorporating the cutting edge of theory, always accompanied by political self-consciousness. It also reminds Canadians that the "Area Studies" model which haunts US Comparative Literature has a Cold War legacy. Area Studies were a way of exercising surveillance over, for example, the Middle East and

"Asia," much along the lines of Said's classic study of Orientalism. They are contrasted today with Ethnic Studies, for example, those studies of hyphenated (African-American, Chinese-American, etc.) minority cultures which in other contexts are labeled multiculturalism and which are always seen as intrinsically politicised. Recent studies have also begun to ask questions as to who (in the wake of the Cold War) funds Area Studies and in the US at least these questions are firmly tied to economic and global forces often attached to transnational corporations. So these areas of study are now crossed by the tensions between differences *within* (the question of cultural minorities, diasporas) and differences *between* — nations (and the project of nation-building) and globalising forces which render such models to some extent irrelevant. This rather schematic impression is the background to this collection.

Post-colonialism was invoked as a kind of reference point but also as a way of putting into question some of the orthodoxies which are already congealing around a concept which at one time had been a necessary reminder of the need to politicise and historicise such fields as (in Canada and elsewhere) Commonwealth Studies and even English Studies. Putting the history back into such fields meant acknowledging imperialisms which in turn lead to the recognition of

Following the notion of the centre/periphery approach in the study of post-coloniality, this special issue of *CRCL/RCLC* presents several areas of Post-Colonial Studies. A point of departure is *Theoretical Considerations* where the notion of centre and periphery is understood to include feminist environmental positions. Mainstream domains of the field are represented by *Middle Eastern, East Indian, and African Post-Colonialities* and by *Latin American and Caribbean Post-colonialities*. Within the *North American and Australian* section — less obvious post-colonial situations — particular attention has been paid to the situation of post-coloniality with reference to North American First Nations and Ethnic Minority Writing in Canada, the US, and Australia. This, while in my mind an obvious post-colonial perspective, has not been explored sufficiently in scholarship (see, for example, Gunew). Especially the Ethnic situation and Ethnic Minority Writing merits more study with application of post-colonial theory. The problematics of multi-culturalism and cultural diversity, that is, the centre and periphery relationships between immigrant populations and mainstream societies *within* the *a priori* post-colonial situation of Canada and Britain, for example, merit serious scholarly attention.

Based on the assumption that the former USSR may be understood as centre by its political, military,

economic, and ideological parameters in its relationships with its satellite countries, *East Central European* literatures are understood as the periphery in relation to the Soviet centre and consequently, as post-colonial situations.

The theoretical departure from mainstream areas of post-colonialities towards a hypothesis that feminist positions and the environment represent relationships of centre and periphery may be perceived as too far extended. However, the centre and periphery approach clearly allows for viewing these areas as illustrating systemic and constructed post-colonial interrelationships where the meaning of post-colonialities becomes a metaphor on a meta level. Further, the notion of centre/periphery can account for such situations as the European where *within* European literatures the concept of "Eurocentrism" often becomes meaningless owing to the peripheral position of such literatures as Portuguese, Catalan, Hungarian, or Slovenian (see Tötösy 1994, 1996). The periphery, in literature and other domains, becomes obvious and "Eurocentrism," an umbrella term meaningful only from a particular position (another "gaze," another *locus*) when we consider, for example, the on-going nightmare of the former Yugoslavia and how the "centre," i.e., Western Europe, responded to the war. After the historical German and Austrian colonial domination of

the "neo" in the "post," that is, of continuing neo-colonialisms in what some rather prematurely described as "post" or decolonising periods. At the very least it was supposed to remind one of cultural inequities and the global hierarchies of culture and languages. These are fraught issues everywhere and by no means clear-cut ones. Since the history of Comparative Literature in Canada (and internationally) has been dominated by European values and concepts, what might it mean if these legacies are juxtaposed or put in productive crisis by concerns emanating from post-colonialism? Or, in Rey Chow's terms,

The critique of Eurocentrism, if it is to be thorough and fundamental, cannot take place at the level of replacing one set of texts with another set of texts — not even if the former are European and the latter are Asian, African, or Latin American. Rather, it must question the very assumption that nation-states with national languages are the only possible cultural formations that produce "literature" that is worth examining. (109)

These are the rationales behind the first section which interrogates not only some of the values and assumptions of Comparative Literature as institutionalised here but questions as well some of the emerging orthodoxies of post-colonialism. Joseph Pugliese, for example, looks at the ways in which assumptions of ontology and the reign of the assimilationist logic of the "same" which permeates national literary histories undo any complacent inscriptions of

difference as in, for example, pluralist notions of multiculturalism.

Some of the distinctions as to where to put pieces were arbitrary ones. For example, Sivamohan Sumathy's reminder that when Comparative Literature is practiced in uncritical and depoliticised contexts it "does not serve any purpose to the postcolonial/third world subject seeking interdependence and multiculturalism in his/her own terms" should function as a framing context to all these debates. His paper, in general, questioning the institutionalised history of English also place him squarely in the tradition which analyses "English" and "English Studies" as one of the key components of postcolonialism (here, it would be useful to look at Ngugi Thiong'o wa's well-known and much-cited essay "On the Abolition of the English Department"). Román de la Campa's essay on Latin American writing also raises the question of English itself as the means for disseminating "theory" in a non-English context. What are the manifold implications for Latin American critics and writers themselves of the kind of Third World textual object created by First World theorists working in the Latin American field?

In the Canadian section "hauntings by otherness" (Apter, qtd. in Bernheimer 12), in line with their manifestations in other settler cultures such as Australia, are

rence to territorial conquest outside of Europe.

I am aware of our selective approach for this special issue of the journal: the field of Post-Colonial Studies would require our attention to many additional areas. However, the availability of space determined the parameters of our selection.

The notion of centre/periphery can be theoretically based on a similar notion within the framework of the Polysystem Theory. Itamar Even-Zohar, in his *Polysystem Studies*, argues that a dominant literature, otherwise also viewed as "source" literature, in the case of colonial literatures "imposes its language and texts on a subjugated community" (68). Here I understand language not only in its primary linguistic function but also within the context of the literary system in all its components, genres, themes, various textual properties, institutional parameters, authorial voices, etc. In most cases, this influence is not immediately obvious or clear but the influence of the literature of the colonial power — or better, the centre — exerts nevertheless an impact that can be observed and analysed.

The notion of "centre and margin" has been illucidated by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, in her well-known article, "No Master Territories": "To use marginality as a starting point rather than an ending point is also to cross beyond it towards other affirmations and

particularly obsessed by the seductions of narratives of origins, autochthony and Aboriginality — groups aptly named the First Nations in Canada. In an uneasy echo of Ethnographic Studies of Aboriginal cultures, Gordon Sayre's analysis identifies the beaver as the "good" object of colonialism who fulfills the teleology embedded in this script and ends up as almost extinct. Keith Harrison's study of Samuel Hearne reveals the comparably uneasy moment when incipient peace keeper Hearne intervenes between his Indian companion Matonabee and an "Eskimo" victim and stages a paradigmatic moment for future Europeans who feel the need to mediate between competing Aboriginalities. Julia Emberley traces the figure of the absent or murdered Inuk wife ("Bertha A") of a French-Canadian trapper through the unyielding RCMP documents, revealing her to be an over-determined site of contention analogous to the North as contested territory amongst the RCMP, Inuit, Americans, and Russians. Bertha A's body paradoxically escapes the competing discursive constructions provided by the documents which paramountly serve the RCMP's mission of surveillance and control and their consequent need to register the "savagery" of the region's inhabitants. Margery Fee in turn asks whether the kinds of "ethnic" questions which are a way of containing cultural difference within

the borders of the nation are in fact tactically useful to the political enterprise of the First Nations engaged in a necessary "strategic essentialism" as they battle for a place in the symbolic register of the nation. Pursuing this register, Sherrill Grace's study of the foundation myth of "Franklin" elegantly provides a compelling image for the organising logic of the special issue of this journal: "Signs, like ships, only appear immobilized by the ice; the ice, like a semiotic system, moves."

Such movements are particularly in evidence in the final section of the journal where the break-up of the Soviet empire might suggest a fertile field for post-colonial questions. As one might expect there are no certainties here, as yet or, indeed, ever. The reassertion of new nationalisms can often mean a kind of reification of or new reference to essentialised identities which Edward Said has identified as a necessary stage in decolonisation but one which must not remain consolidated for too long in case it leads to another form of repressive nationalism.

Roumiana Deltcheva makes the timely suggestion, true of all debates around post-colonialism, that it is crucial to distinguish the various forms of post-colonialism in relation to the specific histories of the countries being discussed. The neat progression: colonised-decolonised/postcolonial never really applies. She suggests that the term is uniformly rejected in

negations" (216). In both Even-Zohar and Trinh's frameworks the main argument is that the centre, while obviously exerting power and influence, nevertheless must be mediated if we are to understand the literatures of the margin. My differentiation between the notions of "margin" and "periphery" stems from the point of view that the notion of margin is too radical and only applicable to a limited set of situations, e.g., the British marginalization of its colonies which was followed by the post-colonial situation, while periphery allows for a view where mediation between centre and periphery is accounted for.

The general perception that Comparative Literature remains, still, Eurocentric is, in the above mentioned context, a questionable one to me. Let me respond autobiographically: While I argue for the support of the study of *alterité*, I am also Eurocentric, but so in a differentiated context. It is European and North American cultures and literatures that I am familiar with, both by personal background and by academic training. At the same time, I am an immigrant in Canada, an "Ethnic." Following my own understanding of centre and periphery, I am thus, as an immigrant, in many aspects on the periphery. Analogously, my situation is not different from the historical situation of many small European nations. When I attended secondary schools in Austria and

Switzerland, as a Hungarian refugee, I was often enough made to feel my situation on the periphery as a Hungarian (and as a refugee): "Hungarians are Mongols who never fully succeeded in becoming Europeans...." Then, in Canada, I "became" a "European" Ethnic. In the battles of political correctness — many aspects of which I fully agree with — hyped Canadian Ethnicities from East Central Europe "fall between the cracks": they are not visible minorities and, as they are not mainstream English- or Québécois-Canadians either, they have no natural links either with any mainstream or with the politically correct situation of visible and racial minorities.

When I return to Europe, I am a Canadian by having spent twenty years here and my situation of periphery is mediated by the veneer of my North American residence and acculturation. It is obvious, then, at least to me, that my sensitivity towards and support of *any* periphery is natural, in addition or rather, *a priori*, to my intellectual position (see my brief argument, 1995, 11-12). It is from this construct that I reject the criticism of Eurocentrism in my own case and that of many "European" groups whether in Europe itself or in North America, precisely because of my position at the periphery — historical and personal — outside the European centre which is often constructed upon

Eastern Europe (although this may not be the case altogether, see, e.g., Pavlyshyn). While there is no doubting the need for the specific applications of post-colonial assumptions, one would nevertheless like to know more about the ways in which the terms, concepts, and debates circulate in that part of the world. What do Central and Eastern Europeans mean when they refer to "post-colonialism"? Whose imperialisms count as such in that place of long memories?

This is also the moment to acknowledge that conspicuously missing from this collection is work dealing with other areas in ferment — South-East Asia, Japan, China. It is of course impossible to have full coverage and it is clear that Eurocentrism remains the prevailing episteme for the journal but things are changing, including the pages of *CRCL/RCLC*, including Comparative Literature and the struggle over claiming "theory."

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faulty assumptions and a simplified perception. The situation of periphery, a post-coloniality, is a matter of degree and follows semi-permeable lines; it is rarely obvious or clear-cut. In addition, more often than not the colonized or the post-colonial colonizes again: the British still colonize the Irish; the French the Algerian immigrants; the Hungarians colonized the Romanians and still colonize the Gypsies; the Romanians now appear to colonize the Hungarians; Canadians were colonized by the British, while Canadians still colonize the Indigenous (First) nations; and so forth, *ad nauseam*.

In the present issue of the journal, as I mentioned, there are essays on a high variety of topics and approaches within our definition(s) of Post-Colonial Studies. The collection contains essays clearly focussed on literary texts while giving space to non-literary topics bearing on the literary. In my opinion, this responds to the best and most fortuitous definition of Comparative Literature.

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