

Re-Reading the Function of Language Variance in Post-Colonial Literary Theory

In as much as post-colonial literary theory seeks to examine the political relevance of the literary text, the post-colonial critic is apparently caught between two seemingly irreconcilable demands:

The ideal nature of the aesthetic phenomenon confronts any attempt at materialist analysis with an apparently unbearable dilemma: either one must stick to the materialist ontological commitment, and evolve into vulgar reductionism; or one must do justice to the object, and slip into idealism. (Moenik 171)

Many critical movements strive to bridge the perceived gap between "the aesthetic" and "the material." Classical and structural Marxism, Cultural Materialism, New Historicism, Queer Theory, and all the various shades of Feminisms commonly seek to avoid either the idealization of the literary aesthetic or the reading of all art as solely political. However, post-colonial literary theory directly confronts this problematic relationship between the aesthetic properties and the political relevance of the literary text. Indeed, this problematic relationship lies at the basis of the entire project of a post-colonial literary theory.

Many critics who work within the field of post-colonial literary theory seek to respect the aesthetic properties of the literary texts that they analyse while simultaneously positioning these texts and the attendant aesthetic properties of these texts within the materialism of the legacy of colonialism. In order to achieve this end, a dominant trend in post-colonial literary theory attempts to fuse the tools of formalism with the political reality of colonialism; in order to synthesize the product that becomes post-colonial literary theory, many post-colonial critics strive to combine the apparently apolitical idealization of the aesthetic that defines New Criticism with the materialist emphasis upon the colonial legacy of oppression and domination that defines Western European history. This synthesis is achieved through the catalyst of language.

Through the common medium of language, Jameson's prison-house that articulates and therefore constrains all reality, aesthetics and politics meet and post-colonial critics find their most potent tool to bridge the gap between literature and history. Within post-colonial literary theory, the reading strategy that has been dubbed "the metonymic function of language variance" appears to foreground most forcefully the co-implication of the aesthetic and the political within

the literary text. By reading through the metonymic function of language variance, post-colonial critics are able to combine the formalist approach to literary aesthetics, which emphasizes the rhetorical and structural properties of the text, with a concrete political praxis, which stresses the historical reality of colonialism.¹ The result of this hybrid union is a strategy of reading which focuses upon how language-use in the literary text marks the dynamics of and resistances to colonial power.

The importance of the metonymic function of language variance to post-colonial literary theory is explicitly revealed by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* who state that language variance is "a feature of all post-colonial texts" (Ashcroft *et al.* 59). However, by positing the *existence* of language variance as an aesthetic property of the post-colonial literary text, Ashcroft *et al.* implicitly

1 The desire to fashion a "politically engaged formalism" extends, of course, beyond the confines of the strategy of reading for or through the metonymic function of language variance. In as much as structural linguistics has contributed to the formalist nature of the contemporary critical *ethos*, the types of analyses indebted to that structuralism are also undergoing a similar reform. Recognizing that structural linguistics focuses on the idealized nature of *la langue* rather than upon the pragmatic and existent level of *la parole*, the early work of Julia Kristeva calls for a revolution in which the speaking subject will be incorporated into the domain of analyses predicated upon structural linguistics: "Our philosophies of language, embodiments of the Idea, are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs. Fascinated by the remains of a process which is partly discursive, they substitute this fetish for what actually produced it" (Kristeva 13). In order to escape this necrophilia, Kristeva proposes a "*dialectical logic of a materialist foundation* — a theory of signification based on the subject, his formation, and his corporeal, linguistic, and social dialectic" (Kristeva 14). In a similar fashion, the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* call for a consideration of social practice within the domain of structural linguistics, a consideration of *la parole* in a science dedicated to and predicated upon *la langue*: "If all human speech is rule-governed, then theory must take all speech behaviour into account rather than consigning some examples to the 'too hard' basket.... Where traditional theory posits the ideal speaker in order to deal with a language which is grammatically consistent, a 'standard' language which can be approached with the use of consistent and coherent structures, polydialectical theory reveals that the performance of speakers, with all the variations that must be taken into account, is the true subject of linguistics" (Ashcroft *et al.* 47). And Ashcroft himself develops this theme by proposing what he dubs "constitutive graphonomy": "the constitutive ethnography of writing systems, is concerned to examine the objective meaning of writing as social accomplishments of these participants. This is because meaning is a social fact which comes within the discourse of a culture, and social facts as well as social structures are themselves social accomplishments. Constitutive Graphonomy is a post-colonial literary theory. It can be described as such for several reasons: it affirms the fact that a literary theory is a cultural formation; it resists the reification of the art form out of its social and cultural provenance; it confirms the text as originating in material practice at a dual site of production and consumption...." (Ashcroft 58). All these various articulations of a "new" direction for structural linguistic analysis seek to bridge the gap between a rarefied (or reified) aesthetic analysis and the materialism of the political. This gap is precisely the gap that is apparently negotiated by the strategy of the metonymic function of language variance.

de-emphasize the role that the critic plays in fashioning the *significance* of this textual property: *language variance* may be an aesthetic property of post-colonial textuality, but the *metonymic function* attributed to that language variance is not an inherent property of language variance itself. Rather, the metonymic function attributed to language variance is an interpretative strategy imposed by the post-colonial critic. The role that the critic plays in fashioning the significance of language variance is important because the metonymic function of language variance has become such a common trope within post-colonial literary theory that its status as trope has become effaced. What was once a deliberate interpretative strategy is now posited as an *a priori* condition of textuality. The result of this effacement is that the role of the critic is forgotten.

If the assumptions that inform the metonymic function of language variance are re-examined, then two quite distinct features of language variance become apparent. First, such an examination reveals the role that the critic plays in interpreting the critical significance of language variance. By recognizing the importance of the critic's interpretative intervention, the status of the metonymic function of language variance as a deliberate reading strategy and not an *a priori* condition of textuality is reinstated. Second, and perhaps more significantly, such an examination reveals that the specific function attributed to language variance depends upon a prior, and unacknowledged, assumption about the relationship of the literary text to post-colonial history. The critics who interpret language variance install a mimetic imperative at the basis of the relationship between literary text and colonial history in order to make language variance culturally significant. But because this mimetic imperative remains unacknowledged by many of the critics who interpret language variance, the metonymic function which is declared as the operating mode of language variance effectively masks the mimetic imperative which makes that metonymic function culturally significant in the first place.

Alan Liu makes a similar observation about what he identifies as the unacknowledged assumptions which inform the New Historicism. In his critique, Liu identifies a weakness within the methodology of New Historicist reading:

A New Historicist paradigm holds up to view a historical context on one side, a literary text on the other, and, in between, a connection of pure nothing. Or rather, what now substitutes for history of ideas between context and text is the fantastic interdisciplinary nothingness of metaphor. (743)

The gap between historical context and literary text identified by Liu in the New Historicism is the same gap that is located at the heart of post-colonial literary criticism. But the function that the problematic bridge of metaphor fulfils in the New Historicism is, I would argue, fulfilled by the problematic bridge of metonymy in post-colonial literary theory. Metaphor in New Historicism and metonymy in post-colonial literary theory both function as tropes which gloss the

problematic relationship between text and context, literature and history, in their respective domains. However, both the metaphoric function in New Historicism and the metonymic function in post-colonial language variance fail to adequately sustain their mandates; both fail to do what they promise. In what follows, I propose to examine the failure of the promise of the metonymic function of language variance.

The strategy of reading the metonymic function of language variance is marked by two complementary operations, both of which appear to install a mimetic imperative beneath their ostensibly metonymic function. On the one hand, the metonymic function of language variance can operate by reading the presence of an untranslated word in a predominantly English language text — e.g., "*obi*" which is the Ibo word for "hut" — as representing the whole of the native culture — in this case, the Ibo culture — through synecdoche, a particular form of metonymic substitution. On the other hand, the metonymic function of language variance can spin off into a kind of rarefied formalism in which the tension between two (or more) levels of discourse — e.g., the presence of the Ibo language and the predominantly English language text — marks an aporetic space in the structure of the text, a space which is read as structurally congruent to the bifurcated structure of any given native society under colonial rule.² In the first operation, language represents culture; in the second operation, textual structure mirrors social structure. Although it is not explicitly stated, these complementary operations appear to rely upon some form of mimetic imperative in order to link the languages of the literary texts analysed to the specific colonial cultures marked in those texts.

The intimation of such a mimetic imperative within the function of language variance is simultaneously the factor which both supports and subverts the entire interpretive enterprise. The mimetic imperative supports the function of language variance by grounding the language of the literary text in a specific culture. But the mimetic imperative subverts that same function because of the numerous critical problems which inhabit any attempt to read literary texts mimetically. Homi Bhabha has launched a sustained critique of mimetic readings of post-colonial literatures³ and the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* have acknowledged that

2 "...the process of allusion installs linguistic distance as a subject of the text. The maintenance of this 'gap' in the cross-cultural text is of profound importance to its ethnographic function" (Ashcroft *et al.* 58-59). "For in one sense all post-colonial literatures are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between 'worlds,' a gap in which the simultaneous processes of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determine their practice. This literature is therefore always written out of the tension between the abrogation of the received English from the centre, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, or even the evolving and distinguishing local English or a monolingual society trying to establish its link with place" (39).

3 "Homi Bhabha has noted the collusion between narrative mode, history, and realist mimetic readings of texts. Taking V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* as his example, Bhabha demonstrates the dangers of the way in which readings of post-colonial works as socially and historically mimetic foster their reabsorption into an English tradition" (Ashcroft *et al.* 34). "There is, however, another way of raising the issue of the representation of the colonial sub-

post-colonial literatures themselves undermine the illusion "that literary discourse constitutes a process of mimetic representation" (Ashcroft *et al.* 55). However, the critics who invoke language variance invariably install a mimetic imperative within the signifying function they attribute to language variance. This mimetic imperative appears to be the only means by which these critics can sustain their desire to make language variance mark cultural difference. Ironically, these same critics attempt to distance the metonymic function attributed to language variance from any mimetic contamination at the same moment that they install mimesis within its workings.

In *Empire*, the tension between these contradictory aspects of the function of language variance is displayed by the conflation, if not outright confusion, of terms used to describe the function of language variance. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin simultaneously describe the function of language variance as metonymic, synecdochic, metaphoric, and as signifying cultural difference. To their credit, they never quite state that the function of language variance operates mimetically. However, I would suggest that both the plethora of terms used to describe the function of language variance, and the lack of precision and consistency that marks the use of those terms, reveals the authors' desire⁴ to distance the function of language variance from mimesis while simultaneously retaining the mimetic function they deny. In other words, the metonymic function attributed to language variance glosses, and thereby obscures, the mimetic imperative that supports the significance bestowed upon language variance by these critics.

For the authors of *Empire*, the metonymic function of language variance is a strategy of abrogation which denies the privilege of English by refusing "the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (38). Language variance thus disturbs the linguistic coherence of the English language text in order to install a "gap" within language use, a gap that marks cultural difference. The *marking* of this gap is the *aesthetic moment* of language variation; the *reading* of this gap as cultural difference is the *metonymic function* that critics attribute to language variation: "language variance itself in such a text is far more profoundly metonymic of cultural difference. The variance itself becomes the metonym, the part which stands for the whole" (52). One could ask some pointed questions here concerning how one

ject which questions the collusion between historicism and realism. It proposes that the category of literature, as of its history, is necessarily and thoroughly mediated: that its reality is not given but produced; its meanings transformatory, historical and relational rather than revelatory; its continuity and coherence underscored by division and difference. This other view demands quite another notion of the historical inscription and entails a critique of representation as simply given" (Bhabha 96).

4 "And, as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire" (Derrida 278).

aspect of a text can be "more profoundly metonymic" than any other aspect of the same text — the assumption being that metonymy is a gradient with stronger and weaker poles? — or why the authors insist on confusing metonymy — the trope of substitute naming — with synecdoche — the related trope which substitutes part for whole. However, the point made here in *Empire* is arguably discernable, the murky filter of terminological imprecision not withstanding: the gap between the imperial language and the native language metonymically stands in for the cultural gap that exists between colonizer and colonized. Thus, in this case, the metonymic function of language variance acts on the level of a structural homology between literary text and material political reality: textual structure mirrors social structure.

But the crucial factor that permits this metonymic, or more precisely, this synecdochic substitution — the relationship between the untranslated non-English word and the colonial culture from which that word originates — remains absent. This relationship is crucial because without the grounding of the non-English word in a native culture, the gap in the English text would have no specific colonial implication but would become merely a structural anomaly at the semantic level; the lexical confusion created by the non-English — and therefore non-sense — word would create an inconsistency in the meaning of the sentence. But in order to assert the colonial relevance of language variance, that non-English word must be anchored to the culture from which it springs. The authors of *Empire* make this connection in an oblique fashion by twice asserting that language variance can be read not in terms of metonymy or even synecdoche, but in terms of metaphor: "The introduction of language variance in this way could be seen to propose a metaphoric entry for the culture into the 'English' text" (51); "Thus the untranslated words, the sounds and the textures of the language can be held to have the power and presence of the culture they signify — to be metaphoric in their 'inference of identity and totality'" (52). What is significant about this introduction of metaphor is not only the terminological confusion it compounds in an already muddled discussion, but also the mimetic implication that the trope of metaphor brings to that discussion.

At the level of rhetorical structure, the trope of metaphor avoids the mediation of "like" or "as" that marks the distance between the two terms of the simile; similarly, the trope of metaphor avoids the mediation of substitution that marks the distinction between the part and the whole in synecdoche or between the substitute name and the primary referent in metonymy. As the trope of identification, metaphor posits a direct unmediated ligature between the two terms of its unity: my love is a rose; *obi* is Ibo culture. Drawing upon this unmediated relationship, the authors of *Empire* posit a metaphorical reading of language variance, and thus a mimetic imperative within language variance, in order to support their desire to make language variance politically significant.

In the context of English Canada, or at least the vision of English Canada that Dennis Lee proposes in his "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space," the kind of aporetic space marked by language variance has a very direct colonial relevance, but it too relies upon the mimetic imperatives implicitly endorsed by the authors of *Empire*. The key to Lee's analysis is the recognition that the language of English Canada is not a native language, but a language imposed by the colonial power and consequent cultural imperialism of America (162). The result of this imperial imposition is, as might be expected, the alienation of the colonial subject in and from language: "The colonial writer does not have words of his own.... The words I knew said Britain, and they said America, but they did not say my home.... To speak unreflectingly in a colony, then, is to use words that speak only alien space" (162-63). So here the mimetic imperative that underlies Lee's argument is revealed in the cultural specificity of an "American" (and sometimes a "British") language which does not "fit" the English Canadian colonial subject. As the authors of *Empire* suggest that the structure of language variance can mirror the structure of the native under colonial rule, so Lee makes the argument that the structure of alienation of the colonial subject in an "alien" language mirrors the authenticity of the Canadian existential state, an authenticity of silence in which "cadence" is located:

Beneath the words our absentee masters have given us, there is an undermining silence, it saps our nerve. And beneath that silence, there is a raw welter of cadence that tumbles and strains toward words and that makes the silence a blessing because it shushes easy speech. That cadence is home. (166)

Thus Lee concludes that the authenticity of the English Canadian subject is her or his variance from the metropolitan language of America, a variance which places the English Canadian subject in the silence of ineffable cadence. In effect, you can feel at home in cadence only when you do not feel at home in the language of the imperial masters; the authenticity of English Canada is its inauthenticity in English America.

Although Lee never speaks of language variance in his article, much less of the metonymic function of language variance, it is clear that his sense of the structure of English Canadian alienation is similar to the fractured structure of language variance. Further, Lee critically interprets that alienation in a fashion similar to how the authors of *Empire* propose to read the significance of language variance. Language variance is usually analysed in a polyglossic text where a non-English word opposes the dominant English text; Lee's argument analyses a monoglossic culture⁵ in which the dominant American English is opposed by a reticent English Canadian silence. In the metonymic function of language variance, the non-English word is seen to embody the authenticity of

⁵ Lee bases his discussion on his personal experience as an anglophone in English Canada. Thus he never equates Canadian society with English Canada — which would thus erase the French Canadian culture. But as an anglophone in English Canada, he inhabits a monoglossic culture.

native culture; Lee states that the authenticity of English Canadian cadence is located in the silence opposing American discourse. For the authors of *Empire*, the tension between the non-English and the English words creates an aporetic gap which is read as metonymic of the structure of the colonial society; Lee reads the tension between the American English and the English Canadian silence as an aporetic gap which reveals the authentic inauthenticity — the homeless homeness — of the English Canadian subject. Consequently, the structure and methodology of Lee's argument clearly agrees with that of the metonymic function of language variance outlined by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *Empire*. And significantly, both Lee and the authors of *Empire* rely upon a certain mimetic imperative which is never directly acknowledged in their analyses, but which nonetheless supports their entire enterprise.

Although both Lee and the authors of *Empire* commonly rely upon unacknowledged mimetic imperatives in their studies, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin at least attempt to wrestle with the threat of mimesis within their understanding of the function of language variance. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin may implicitly endorse a mimetic view of language, but they explicitly attempt to distance themselves from any essentialist view of language, the view that culture is embodied in language:

It is commonly held that in this way, words somehow embody the culture from which they derive.... The idea that language somehow "embodies" culture in this way is a seductive one for post-colonial readers.... Such an essentialist view of language has an appeal within an abrogative stance, and has been invoked by some post-colonial writers engaged in "decolonizing" projects. But it is a false and dangerous argument. (Ashcroft *et al.* 53).

This rejection of the essentialist view of language appears as a moment of theoretical rigour in *Empire*. But at the same time, this moment introduces a number of critical fissures into the project of reading the function of language variance. By ostensibly disposing of the culture-in-language argument, the authors of *Empire* seem to emancipate language variance from its cultural specificity. If the non-English word does not embody or mimetically relate to its root culture, then how can the relationship between language variance and post-colonial societies possibly be articulated? By severing this connection between word and culture, Ashcroft *et al.* apparently consign language variance to the rarefied structural abstraction of a formalist analysis; without the social grounding of language variance, the structural anomaly marked by language variance becomes detached from any political relevance.

In the wake of this rejection of mimesis, the function attributed to language variance by the authors of *Empire* fails to capture its political relevance. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin strive to characterize language variance as a formalism in which the structural gap, marked by language variance, reveals the

moment of Otherness. Language variance becomes an aporetic gap of silence which reveals the presence of alterity within a homogeneous whole:

The articulation of two quite opposed possibilities of speaking and therefore of political and cultural identification outlines a cultural space between them which is left unfulfilled, and which, indeed, locates a major signifying difference in the post-colonial text. The "cultural space" is the direct consequence of the metonymic function of language variance. It is the "absence" which occupies the gap between the contiguous inter/faces of the "official" language of the text and the cultural difference brought to it. Thus the alterity in that metonymic juncture establishes a silence beyond which the cultural Otherness of the text cannot be traversed by the colonial language. By means of this gap of silence the text resists incorporation into "English literature" or some universal literary mode, not because there is any inherent hindrance to someone from a different cultural understanding what the text means, but because this constructed gap consolidates its difference. (Ashcroft *et al.* 54-55)

Even though this moment of structural analysis attempts to articulate the significance of language variance without resorting to mimetic terminology, the mimetic imperatives creep back into the discussion. The authors of *Empire* assert that language and identity are interdependent (Ashcroft *et al.* 54), that "speaking" becomes "cultural identification," but they do not indicate how this connection is to be understood. Yet there is clearly a direct ligature between language and culture posited here. This ligature is developed when the authors state that the "official language of the text" is opposed by an Other language which brings "cultural difference" to the text. Thus the "local culture" is imported "through the inclusion of such variance" (55). So again language is directly linked with culture, even though the authors claim that "language does not embody culture" (57). Although Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin maintain their distance from mimesis by claiming that "such writing neither represents culture nor gives rise to a world-view," they strive to maintain a ligature between culture and language by asserting that the language of the post-colonial literary text "dwells at the intersection of a vast array of cultural conditions" (59). But again, the authors do not indicate how such a view of the relationship between culture and language can be understood without devolving into mimeticism. Clearly there is at least a tension, if not an outright contradiction, between the rejection of mimesis that the authors proclaim in *Empire* and the imperatives that the authors employ in order to anchor language variance in a cultural specificity.

In the wake of their rejection of mimesis, the authors of *Empire* are bereft of an adequate theoretical paradigm to bridge the gap between the language of the post-colonial text and the reality of post-colonial societies. In their attempt to forge a new relationship between text and context, literature and history, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin invoke the trope of metonymy only to support its function with a mimetic base. In this way, the authors return to their problematic starting point; they never leave mimesis behind. The mimetic imperatives that are

explicitly rejected in *Empire* return to support the project of reading the significance of language variance. Their formalism relies upon a mimeticism.

Stephen Slemon is the critic who has, perhaps, been most successful in making the structural anomalies marked by language variance politically relevant in the context of colonialism. And Slemon's success is due, in part, to the explicit materialist approach he adopts when reading literary texts. For Slemon, the discourse of colonialism "always operates through material agents" and nowhere has this material mediation been more strongly in place than "through the State apparatus of colonialist education ... [and] the canonical texts of European literature" (103). Paraphrasing Guari Viswanathan's "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India," Slemon states that "it is the English 'book' which becomes the foremost machinery for forging the form of obedience in colonial subjects which Gramsci calls domination by consent" (103). With this materialist reading of the social placement of the canonical English book, a reading which in Viswanathan embraces the history of the pedagogic empire of colonialism in India, Slemon can confidently assert that "the literary text thus affords post-colonial criticism a material referent in social struggle" (103).

What is so appealing about Slemon's materialist analysis — heavily indebted to Viswanathan to be sure — is that it posits the importance of the dominant tropes of the canonical English literary texts to the imposition of, and the struggle against, colonial rule without ever devolving into the naïveté of a mimetic reading. Slemon does not posit some complex metaphorical nothingness between *Vanity Fair* and India under colonial rule. Rather, by invoking Viswanathan's rigorous analysis, Slemon is able to demonstrate by allusion the historical importance of canonical English texts to the imposition of colonial rule. The point is not that these canonical texts embody British culture, but that they were tools used by the British in order to establish and maintain colonial rule. These texts were material agents in the establishment of colonialism. Thus it is not surprising that the rise of post-colonial literatures should become a site of resistance against the legacy of colonialism.

Slemon consequently proposes a kind of analysis that he dubs "reading for figural resistance," a strategy which proposes to meld a materialist emphasis upon the historical and political importance of canonical English texts to colonialism with a formalist emphasis upon the rhetorical tropes embodied in those texts:

the basic manoeuvre in this approach is to focus on some pattern of textual echoing or repetition in post-colonial literary documents and to examine the way in which those texts "work" the linguistic and narrative patterns of the imperial centre through a complex rhetoric of intertextual quotation. (101)

In other words, the post-colonial text marks its resistance to imperial culture by ironizing the literary tropes that form part of the material legacy of colonialism: that is, by inhabiting these tropes while turning them against themselves. Figural

resistance can be seen as a form of subversion which operates at the level of the rhetorical structures of the text:

what "theory" has brought to this observation is a mechanism by which the post-colonial text can be seen to advance its own oppositional "reading" of English cultural imperialism not simply on its thematic level but also within the rhetorical or topological apparatus of its figural language itself. Richard Terdman's term for this kind of rhetorical operation is "counter-discourse," and the term is an apt one. For in the specific form of textual repetition at work here, post-colonial literary writing seems to take hold of the *discursive* machineries of imperial or colonial power and to drive them outwards, beyond the space of their containing impetus and into a theatre of textual supplementation. This supplementation, in turn, functions as a form of figural displacement or supplantation whose effect is to dislocate the discourse of imperialism... (101)

In this way, Slemon offers a reading strategy that elucidates a form of cultural resistance operating through the rhetorical structures of the text.⁶ The political

6 Slemon's "reading for figural resistance" is markedly similar to the shocking image of resistance that Gayatri Spivak outlines at the end of her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?": "In a direct way, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri's suicide invokes a particular trope — suicide of a young woman — which has a particular culturally and historically defined reading — in this case, pre-marital pregnancy. But by waiting until she was menstruating before hanging herself, Bhaduri inhabits that trope of suicide only to subvert and resist its usual reading. Bhaduri invokes the trope only to ironize it, and thereby make a political statement of powerful and tragic resistance." "As a young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father's modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhuvaneshwari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself. Bhuvaneshwari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation" (1988, 307). Spivak continues by elucidating the impact of Bhaduri's suicide: "In the immediate context, her act became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity. The displacing gesture — waiting for menstruation — is at first a reversal [which is the structure of irony] of the interdict against a menstruating widow's right to inmolate herself; the unclean widow must wait, publicly, until the cleansing bath of the fourth day, when she is no longer menstruating, in order to claim her dubious privilege. In this reading, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri's suicide is an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide as much as the hegemonic account of the blazing, fighting, familial Durga" (308). While I obviously do not want to equate the tragic self-sacrifice of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri's suicide with the authorial manipulation of literary rhetoric, I do want to illustrate how both the text that is this particular suicide (in her interview entitled "The Problem of Cultural Self-Representation," Spivak refers to her own reading of this suicide in terms of analyzing and representing Bhaduri's text [1990, 57]) and the text that is colonial literary rhetoric are similarly subject to an ironic manipulation which marks a strategy of resistance. Bhaduri marks her resistance to the socially prescribed reading of a young woman's suicide through her body; post-colonial literary texts can mark their resistance to colonial rule through their textual bodies which are composed of literary rhetoric. And both operate through a resistant strategy of ironic inversion.

relevance of this strategy does not depend upon the mimetic properties of those rhetorical structures, as is the case with language variance. Instead, the rhetorical structures are politically significant because they form part of the historical legacy of colonialism that was put in place through the material agency of the imperialist educational institutions: "This recognition of ideological valency in canonical English literary texts lies at the 'beginnings' of those critical readings that stress the centrality of post-colonial *texts* in the sphere of cultural work and in the promulgation of anti-colonial resistance" (103). In short, a materialist reading of literary texts illustrates how literature is always already political.

With the materialist emphasis, rather than the mimetic emphasis, upon the literary text so firmly established at the basis of Slemon's methodology of reading for figural resistance, Slemon's move to read post-colonial texts in terms of their mimetic relation to post-colonial culture is all the more puzzling. In the three examples that Slemon offers as paradigms of reading for figural resistance, the mimetic relationship between the text and the culture from which it springs is explicitly articulated in place of the materialist relationship which orients the methodology of reading for figural resistance. The assumption of a mimetic dimension to textuality takes the place of the rigorous historical research and institutional analysis provided by a critic such as Viswanathan.

Slemon cites Diana Brydon's analysis of English Canadian re-writings of *The Tempest* in her "Re-Writing *The Tempest*," Helen Tiffin's work on George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* and Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* in her "Recuperative Strategies in the Post-Colonial Novel," and Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*, which analyses Yambo Ouologuem's strategic plagiarism in *Le Devoir de Violence*. All of these critics are offered as readers of figural resistance who illustrate how their chosen texts "inhabit a narrative frame and a figural space generated by European discourse" in order to "evoke the continuing presence of Empire so that the literary text can work against, and thus unseat, imperialism's characteristic modes of cognition" (Slemon 105). What is so incongruous about these examples, in the context of Slemon's materialist emphasis upon the colonial legacy of literary rhetoric, is the fashion in which these critics dispose of the historical basis of the tropes under analysis and simply posit an unexamined, and what is more, an unsupported "colonial" characteristic to these tropes. Miller, Tiffin, and Brydon simply posit that there are such things as "colonialist tropes" but make no effort to identify the manner in which these tropes are historically implicated, nor through what material agents these tropes are mediated. The effect of these omissions is to erase not only the historical and therefore the materialist dimension of literary rhetoric, but also the cultural specificity of rhetorical figures: the specificity not only of the tropes to the culture from which they spring, but also to the culture upon which they are imposed.

The absence of any materialist reading in Miller, Tiffin, and Brydon forces Slemon to seek another means of articulating the political relevance of their critical analyses. And what Slemon highlights in the critical readings of these three exemplary critics is the mimetic dimension that their work asserts: "for here [in Brydon's analysis] Canadian literary texts are assumed to be capable of reflecting a specific lived experience" (105); in Tiffin's analysis, the literary text becomes "a reflective mimetic practice [that] productively enables possible 'ways of knowing' specifically grounded in post-colonial experience" (105); for Miller, the identification of "resistance depends on a mimetic assumption about the cultural specificity of this plagiaristic play" (106). In the same way that the authors of *Empire* import a native culture into the literary text through the metaphorical aspect of a language variance which purportedly operates through metonymy, so Brydon, Tiffin, and Miller import native culture into the domain of colonial literary rhetoric through a mimetic reading of the thematic level of their chosen texts. What is even more surprising is that Slemon applauds this desire to read these texts mimetically even though he asserts that post-colonial literary texts themselves refuse such mimetic imperatives:

if the mainstream Western critical industry has at last discovered its theoretical ground for challenging the mimetic or reflective status of the literary text, the presence of a "crisis in representation" is by no means a recent discovery to those who comprise the Others of Empire. In the linguistically fractured space of colonialist transplantation and intervention, the smugly confident, astonishingly privileged belief that language can ever actually capture and contain the world has never been allowed to take root. (103-04)

Pointing to the material experience of post-colonial societies, Slemon rejects the possibility that literary texts can mimetically capture the fractured and dynamic nature of those societies. But as we have just seen, Slemon endorses those same mimetic capabilities in the critical analyses of Tiffin, Brydon, and Miller. This tension creates an obvious contradiction in Slemon's project of reading for figural resistance.

The two key components which support Slemon's practice of reading for figural resistance — the materialist analysis and the prohibition against mimesis — are ignored by the critics cited as exemplary cases of reading for figural resistance. When Slemon offers Brydon, Tiffin, and Miller as exemplary cases, none of these critics respects either founding assertion of Slemon's methodology of reading. This incongruity, introduced not so much by Brydon, Tiffin, and Miller as by Slemon himself in choosing these examples, operates to drastically undercut the force and validity of Slemon's proposal of a reading for figural resistance.

Slemon's original proposal to read the manipulation of literary rhetoric in post-colonial texts promises to operate in a fashion similar to the manner in which language variance is outlined in *Empire*. Just as language variance pro-

poses to read the tension between the English and the non-English word, so Slemmon proposes to read the English colonial trope against its manipulation and ironization in the post-colonial literary text. Just as the gap between the English and the non-English word in the paradigm of reading language variance is read as significant of cultural difference, so the tension between the standard canonical trope and its ironized manipulation is read as marking the resistance of the colonized to the colonizer. Both language variance and the rhetorical manipulation that marks the resistance mapped out by Slemmon operate as strategies of abrogation: language variance abrogates imperial culture by disrupting the linguistic dominance of the English text; Slemmon's reading for figural resistance seeks out those moments when the dominance of English literary rhetoric is disrupted by a subversive manipulation of those same tropes. And just as the authors of *Empire* seem unable to support the metonymic function of language variance without resorting to the broken crutch of a mimetic imperative between language and culture, so Slemmon installs a similar mimetic imperative by means of the examples he chooses to illustrate his reading strategy. Consequently, reading for figural resistance collapses into the naïveté of a mimetic reading.

The materialist emphasis that gave Slemmon's argument its force is lost. By abandoning the materialist analysis of a Viswanathan, Slemmon is forced to introduce a mimetic dimension to post-colonial textuality in order to make his analysis politically relevant. Had Slemmon maintained the reading of history that forms the materialist analysis of colonialism, then the theoretically problematic dimension of mimesis would not be a necessary component of the program of reading for figural resistance. The introduction of the mimetic approach to textuality not only problematizes the validity of Slemmon's position, but simultaneously shifts the focus of his reading strategy from the rhetorical figures of the text — which are the legacy of colonialism — to the thematic level of the text; the discussion no longer focusses on how the text is structured, but on what the text is about. Thus Slemmon moves away from the formal analysis of New Criticism to a more general discussion of how the colonial society is reflected in the text.

Slemmon seems to be aware of these tensions in his article,⁷ and in an attempt to make mimesis palatable — even though he has already stated that post-colonial texts refuse mimetic categories — he proposes a *new mimesis*. Drawing upon the linguistic plurality of colonial cultures (the linguistic plurality that is manifest in the metonymic function of language variance), Slemmon argues that:

This recognition of the historical "unsettlement" in linguistic reference within colonial writing and colonised cultures articulates an inescapable "pre-text" for post-colonial

writing and establishes post-colonial representation as necessarily marked by its status of *conditionality*. Reading for post-colonial resistance, then, tends to involve not only a focus on the question of textuality and power but also — and ambivalently — an assumption of a new kind of *mimeticism* at work in the post-colonial reiterative text. Writing that gestures towards its own reflective status, its arbitrary cast, and its ultimate indeterminacy, it is argued, amounts to an excruciatingly exact description of the post-colonial condition, for in the linguistically "unsettled" spaces of colonised culture an imported language can never come fully into full referential "presence." Acts of writing that signal this inescapable conditionality are always — and radically — acts of post-colonial explanation and acts of "writing back." (104)

It is important to note how the *new mimeticism* that Slemmon outlines does not operate at the thematic level of the text. Rather, the structural opposition between rhetorical trope and its ironic reiteration marks an indeterminacy or a "gap" in the post-colonial text which mirrors the post-colonial condition. The fractured and indeterminate structure of the literary text mirrors the fractured and indeterminate nature of post-colonial societies. Thus, Slemmon's *new mimeticism* is yet another form of the structural homology between text and context that is outlined by the authors of *Empire* in their proposal of the function of language variance. But instead of operating through the juxtaposition of English language and native tongue, Slemmon's *new mimeticism* is revealed by the subversion of colonial literary rhetoric through the ironizing of those rhetorical tropes in the post-colonial text. Just as language variance creates a gap in the post-colonial text which is read as structurally homologous to the post-colonial society to which it somehow relates, so the moment of the *new mimeticism* is revealed in the gap between colonial literary rhetorical and its ironic reiteration, a gap which is subsequently read as mimetically related to post-colonial society. Consequently, Slemmon's *new mimeticism* really is not that new at all, but is a variation on a theme that also appears in *Empire*.

What is new about Slemmon's proposal is the manner in which he forthrightly acknowledges that a mimetic approach to post-colonial literature is a part of his reading strategy. Unlike the authors of *Empire* who bury the mimetic imperatives that inform their approach to literature beneath a veil of contradictory terminology, Slemmon openly posits mimesis at the foundation of his analysis. However, this forthrightness is problematic and quite puzzling because the mimetic imperative is an unnecessary element of reading for figural resistance. The materialist approach to literature that was firmly rooted at the base of Slemmon's reading strategy grounded his proposed praxis in a sound political framework. The materialist approach illustrates the means by which literary rhetoric is an agent of colonial domination, and thus an important arena of resistance. But by moving away from that materialist approach, and thus the paradigm which relates literary rhetoric to post-colonial societies, Slemmon's reading strategy teeters

7 "The 'new' post-colonial approaches to reading for resistance conflate two quite separate methodological strategies, both of which are necessary to the production or recognition of a post-colonial discourse, but each of which — from a purely 'theoretical' perspective — is antithetical to the other" (Slemmon 107).

between the two dangers which frame this entire discussion: the naïveté of a mimetic reading and apolitical abstraction of a formalist analysis.

In order to make reading for figural resistance politically relevant, Slemmon relies upon the mimetic imperatives that have never entirely left his discussion. In the following passage, Slemmon makes his strongest statement concerning the necessity of this mimetic imperative for any articulation of the relationship between the literary text and post-colonial reality:

There is a paradox here: for although "theory" has enabled us to locate counter-discursive energies in the figural (as opposed to the thematic) performance of the post-colonial writing, we can only see the *complete* operations of that counter-discursive practice when we posit, disobediently, a mimetic dimension to textuality *against* the foundational principles of that enabling and originary "theory." (107)

But is it true that the "complete" operations of reading for figural resistance can only be seen when the critic "posits" a mimetic dimension to textuality? Certainly the materialist approach outlined at the head of Slemmon's article provides a viable theoretical framework in which the operations of counter-discourse can be analysed. The question one is driven to ask is this: why did Slemmon abandon the materialist approach in the first place? And even further, one must ask when mimesis became a dimension of textuality that a critic can "posit" at will? This is especially troublesome given the theoretical problems inherent within mimesis and the repeated claims by most post-colonial critics that post-colonial texts directly contest the validity of mimetic paradigms. It seems that once again the lure of mimesis, the seduction of the mimetic paradigm, has captivated another critic with its promise of a powerful rubric which proposes to ground the abstract formal properties of literary texts in a material political reality.

All of the critics under discussion in this paper are united by the ineluctability of mimesis in their critical projects. Mimesis is the unacknowledged desire that mars the theoretical validity of each of the forms of language variance that are proposed by Lee, Slemmon, and the authors of *Empire*. If the particular strategy of reading language variance is to be of value to post-colonial literary theory, then it must be purged of its mimetic imperatives. Simply put, the mimetic imperatives that lurk beneath the function of language variance rob this valuable tool of radical potential. The strategy of reading language variance needs a methodological re-orientation in order to capture its potential. Perhaps the most promising direction that re-orientation can follow is on the path of a materialist reading of literary texts.

By rights, post-colonial literary theory is already a materialist reading of literary texts. But if this is the case, then the strategy of language variance has been by-passed by the dominant direction of the movement which spawned it. Clearly, a materialist approach will not be the panacea for the strategy of

language variance,⁸ but the kind of materialism outlined at the head of Slemmon's article offers the means of determining the mechanisms by which literary texts and their accompanying rhetorical formulations are culturally specific. Further, a materialist examination of the history of colonialism in a certain society, and how that history affects the development of the language structures of that society, will more firmly ground the cultural specificity of language variance in literary texts. To borrow the terminology of Althusserian Marxism, a materialist approach to literary studies in the post-colonial context offers the means by which literary texts, literary rhetoric, and the languages of natives peoples can be seen in terms of their implication in the ideological state apparatus. Thus any resistances that appears within these apparatus resist the dominant colonial State

8 If a materialist approach were a panacea, then Raymond Williams would not have written his *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. But the problems that Williams identifies in this work have less to do with any mimetic spectres than they have to do with the tendency of materialism to fall prey to its own methodology: "There are inevitable difficulties in any serious materialism ... first, that in the continuing process of investigation, the initial and all successive categories are inherently subject to radical revision, and in this are unlike the relatively protected categories of presumed or revealed truths; second, that in the very course of opposing systematic universal explanations of many of the common-ground processes, provisional and secular procedures and findings tend to be grouped into what appear but can never be systematic, universal and categorical explanations of the same general kind. Thus material investigation, grounded in the rejection of categorical hypotheses of an unverifiable kind, and basing its own confidence in a set of provisional working procedures and demonstrations, finds itself pulled nevertheless towards closed generalizing systems: finds itself materialism or a materialism" (103). Thus materialist investigation needs to enact a continual process of self-scepticism — a materialism of materialism — in order to avoid the possibility of critical stagnation outlined by Williams. The charges of mimeticism that are often levelled against materialist analyses usually focus on the classical Marxist doctrine of "reflection": the notion that literary texts are completely determined by, and therefore fully reflect, the economic base which produces them. This mimetic aspect of classical Marxism seems to place a materialist reading within the same critical conundrum that plagues the function of language variance. However, Pierre Macherey has strongly argued that the notion of reflection in Marxist analysis has often been interpreted in an *idealist* rather than in its proper *materialist* manner: "the aesthetic which sees art as an *image* of reality ... is not at all proper to Marxism: it is even foreign to it, and it cannot use it except mistakenly... A primary basic characteristic distinguishes the idealist and the materialist concepts of reflection. In the first case, the function of the reflection is simple, indivisible; the reflection is an image; it defines itself through a unique property: its resemblance; we will say that this definition is controlled by the category of identity. From the materialist point of view, on the other hand, the notion of reflection is essentially complex... First, there is the *objectivity* of the reflection: this rests on the materialist reality which gives its content, through which it is determined, and which in return confers upon it a real consistency; the reflection is objective insofar as it is itself a material reality and is produced within the conditions imposed upon it by the movement of historical and social reality. Then there is the *precision* of the reflection which measures its correspondence to the reality which determines it" (14). Thus materialist analysis does not fall prey to mimetic imperatives. Yet without these mimetic imperatives, a materialist analysis still manages to ground the literary text in its social matrix.

which produces these apparatus in the first instance; resistance within the "literary" is always already "political."

This appeal to a materialist approach to post-colonial literature is voiced by Homi Bhabha who calls for an "ideological analysis" based upon Althusserian Marxism (106-07):

Unlike image analysis, where the knowledge of the *production* of the text is limited to the question of its reflection and evaluation, ideological analysis proposes textual signification as the articulation of the historical in the form of literary representation. The politics of signification are not seen as a prescriptive construction or an authorial intention working on the "outside" of the text. Literature and History, mediated by the concept of ideological practice, are part of an internal contradiction which, Macherey suggests, constitutes literature as an ideological form. (108)

This recognition of the ideological nature of literature has always been at the forefront of post-colonial literary theory. But the means by which this ideological valency can be analysed is surprisingly lacking in the specific strategy of reading language variance. Caught up in the web of its own mimetic entrapment, the strategy of language variance has been unable to see its way clear to the ideological valency in which it is always already implicated. But if that mimetic web can be broken, and the materialist approach to the reading of language variance can be seized, then the critical significance of language variance may be restored.

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