

Literary Prizes and Diasporic Writers in Canada: Valorization or Containment

Olga Stein

York University, Canada

In his book *Routes*, ethnographic theorist James Clifford invokes Walter Benjamin's "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" to remind us that Benjamin labored to "break the thrall of historicist inevitability"; his aim was to disrupt the illusion of "the continuum of history," and help readers envision "different, discontinuous futures" (Clifford 331). In the chapter on Diasporas of Clifford's book, Benjamin's influence is also apparent on the American writer, Ralph Ellison. Ellison's "black version" of Benjamin's "practice of counter-memory" is shown as the praxis or politics of interrupting historical continuities. Instead of Benjamin's "monads" or "fissures" in the historical continuum, Ellison proffers "syncopated temporality – a different rhythm of living and being" to portray black historical experience. It is in this "syncopated time" that effaced stories are recovered, different futures imagined" (264).

The trope of "syncopated temporality" is useful in a discussion that uses Timothy Brennan's *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* as a framework for distinguishing between diverging perspectives concerning the reception and valorization of third-world, diasporic or minority literature.¹ "Syncopated temporality" is assumed to be comparable to Brennan's notion of social dissonance. It is the kind of experience that is overlooked in cosmopolitan "inclusive" pronouncements on contemporary politics, economics, and societies. For Brennan it is

¹Brennan states that his use of the term "third world" is "phenomenological" (36). It may be useful here to add Huggan's definition of 'postcolonial' literatures as works which have emerged from the former colonies and which, like the word postcolonialism itself, function as an "index of resistance, a perceived imperative to rewrite the social text of continuing imperial dominance" (3).

also that hard-to-imagine “psychological and moral space that is not Euro-American or whose variations on Euro-America do not pay the non-European sufficient homage” (27).

The relevance of this idea to the types of literature described above is, in broad terms, the matter of representation; at stake, in other words, is the extent to which a ‘rhythm’ of being – that falls outside of experience that is conventional by Western standards or that perturbs one’s usual sense of the world – is given consideration in literature made widely available in Europe and North America.

According to Brennan, even astute and well-intentioned theorizers of cultural hybridity,² like James Clifford and Paul Rabinow, miss the subtle conceptual problem, thereby side-stepping “...*fissures* [my emphasis] between a perfectly defensible ethics – being against ‘universal truths, overly relativized preciousness’ – and the practical difficulties and inappropriateness of living by such an ethic as [let’s say] a participant in anticolonial war” (18).

Such ‘fissures’, Brennan argues in *At Home in the World*, are descriptive not only of a third-world literature, which presumably reflects genuine socio-political sentiments in places of embattled but unswerving nationalism; they also convey a way of being for ethnic and racial minorities, and immigrants to Europe and North America who remain marginalized socially and economically, whose sense of dislocation does not disappear, and who struggle to safeguard their racial, ethnic, or national distinctiveness against what Brennan refers to as Western – more specifically, American – cultural homogeneity. It is a homogeneity, explains Brennan, that wears the mantle of ‘multiculturalism’ or transculturalism. It is a cosmopolitanism

² Clifford’s use of ‘hybridity’ is more general (like the word ‘culture’) than the instance where Brennan introduces the term in association with ‘third-world literature’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ to describe “aesthetic novelty”: “Its negotiations, which give the term ‘hybridity’ its currency, are typically cast as the creatively tortured middle ground occupied by disparate cultural identities. Without diminishing the importance of self-definition, one notices the tendency in this discourse of belonging to deemphasize or ignore the immediately functional sense in which negotiation itself must be understood. Merged with the concept of transculturation, negotiation is also an act of muting antagonistic political objectives” (37).

that, in its affiliation with ‘globalism,’ dismisses politically-charged binaries like center/periphery, dominant/dominated, subjection/autonomy on the grounds that these no longer describe the current complexity of national and international life. Let us return to Ellison’s “syncopated temporality,” which can serve as a point of divergence for theorists like Brennan and Clifford. Brennan challenges cosmopolitan cultural theorists for their reluctance to foreground the persistence of postcoloniality in the form of economic and cultural imperialism – “structural inequality” or “social dissonance” that operates globally through transnational corporations and international capital, and locally through exploitative labour practices, and the commodification (as a containment strategy) of the politics and aesthetics of alterity. Clifford, by contrast, hones in on another feature of the contemporary world. He attempts to demonstrate that hybridity, changeability, and the impossibility of neat dichotomies such as outsider/insider, at home/abroad now characterize life not just in metropolitan areas but in locales ethnographers once considered remote and homogeneous. For Clifford, it is not just the case that hybridization is an ancient story of civilizations – it is the only story – then and now.

For Brennan, the theoretical direction of cosmopolitanism works alongside the “materiality of ideology” of a “U.S. media and educational apparatus of immense domestic resources” (26). Consumption of related material is part and parcel of the commerce and ideology of the literary and academic publishing complex. According to Brennan, the “strength and prestige of the U.S. publishing industry cannot be discounted as an important (although obviously not exclusive) recruiter, trainer, and final arbiter of literary trends: a kind of corporate literary salon” (39).

The arguments in *At Home in the World* that explain how theory, critical commentary, and literary writing are conditioned – ideologically and aesthetically – are numerous and cannot be quickly summarized here. However, for purposes of this paper two points are key: First, according to Brennan, the pressure to conform, to take on the role of the newest model citizen in the West, has a uniform effect on all diasporic or minority literature. Whether a writer is from the Third World, a former dissident

from Eastern Europe or Latin America, or a member of a racial or ethnic minority still marginalized in North America and Western Europe, a similar set of qualities can be discerned in the work. Brennan explains: “This new literature is characterized also by a flattening of influences – a juxtaposition of what previously had been thought to be alien cultural elements. The desired resonance of such juxtapositions is not to show (like E. M. Forster in *A Passage to India*) cultural dissonance, mutual incomprehensibility, but rather unity and complementarity” (39). Elsewhere, Brennan writes something similar, but this time with emphasis on the stories of immigration: “The immigrant has become a fetish, and the images of immigration as heroic survival have become the new mixed-race, intercultural products of the American crucible seen as a source of American strength” (205). “Cultural dissonance is internalized and made invisible,” writes Brennan (43).

What is being addressed here is that aforementioned “syncopation” in everyday life. That deeply felt sense of social exclusion, or else a profound commitment to political dissent, either *is not* or *is not fully* revealed in writing. There is a certain range within which criticism of the US and the West is acceptable; this range – of what is acceptable for wide dissemination in the US and other liberal democracies – has a strong bearing on the concept of the “politico-exotic” or the commodified (fetishized) “political” subject. This, then, is the second point that requires emphasis. Obviously, there is nothing new in the idea that the Other is commodifiable.³ There is, nevertheless, something significant in Brennan’s argument that the influences of cosmopolitanism – as cultural theory, and more generally, as a way of thinking that works alongside other hegemonic processes – temper the messages of third-world, diasporic or minority authors and affect reception through a

³ The concept of commodity fetishism was introduced by Marx. Freud further developed the psychic aspects of fetishism. These concepts have since been deployed by countless thinkers – eg., Theodor Adorno and Jean Baudrillard. Notably, in his writings on colonialism, Homi Bhaba linked fetishism with “the exotic and the erotic to set up narratives of desire for, and partial containment of, the culturally ‘othered’ body.” For Frederic Jameson commodity fetishism is a process in Western postmodern culture, in which the exotic has its own unique role: it is “a symptom of the ubiquitous ‘aestheticization of the real’” (Huggan 18).

dual process of aestheticization and depoliticization. For Brennan, such works are made “exotic” consciously by writers trying to meet Western readers’ expectations:

Implicit in the acceptance of a third-world literature whose politics is unashamed and central to its aesthetics comes a potentially radical expansion of the degrees and types of aesthetic value appreciable in the metropolitan centers. But the very emphasis on “politics” paradoxically disables that appreciation. Now that “politics” is out in the open, one sees less clearly the narrow range that politics is allowed to have at the aesthetic level. (205)

This is political writing “in a readily consumable form” (207). Evident here is the link between “postcoloniality as a global regime of value and a cosmopolitan alterity industry whose products are geared for educational use” as well as entertainment (Huggan 12). Cultural difference and the corresponding politics of dissent can be used ‘strategically’ for attaining cultural capital (in part through the symbolic value of speaking from a position of marginality) by academics, critics, and literary writers, but only if their writing falls into that “narrow range” of the politically palatable.

Brennan’s principal arguments clearly inform Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. However, Huggan expands on these arguments in ways that suggest new analytical avenues, as well as more nuanced approaches to central issues, including the intractable problem of irreconcilable values and objectives. For example, Huggan contends that despite the “powerful forces of metropolitan mediation,” authenticity – as expressions of resistance or social critique – continues to depend on many things, and one must not discount the various means available to authors:

Postcolonial writers/thinkers...are both aware of and resistant to their interpellation as marginal spokespersons, institutionalised cultural commentators and representatives (iconic) figures. What is more, they make their readers aware of the constructedness of such cultural categories; their texts are metacommentaries on the politics of translation, on the power relations that inform cross-cultural perception and representation. (Huggan 26)⁴

⁴ Huggan’s comments on Achebe, Naipaul and Rushdie serve as a response to Brennan. These are successful postcolonial writers/thinkers “who have proven adept at manipulating the codes of

“Regimes of value,” although subject to powerful hegemonic influences within a political and social culture, should not be treated as monolithic or immutable. One can accept that value is a socially constructed phenomenon and concede at the same time that competing regimes of value characterize any society. In his book, *Economics and Culture*, David Thorsby points out, for instance, that the notion of a dominant culture

...opens up the question of defining ‘popular culture’, an area seen in contemporary cultural studies as being oppositional to the hegemonic and restrictive practices of ‘high culture’. Furthermore, concepts of culture as transactional emphasize the fact that culture is not homogeneous and static, but an evolving, shifting, diverse and many-faceted phenomenon.... [C]ulture as an inventory of objects...becomes unstable and its content contestable when the dynamics of cultural processes and the power relationships they imply are brought into account. (7)

That mainstream culture itself is comprised of any number of sub-cultures (or alternative cultures) is not conjecture. Subordinate social groups – that is, immigrants, racial/ethnic minorities – do not disappear simply because they fail to gain adequate political representation. In fact, minority writers consciously make use of these types of audiences. Huggan writes: “Such texts often tend to dramatise the dislocations and dispersals, commenting ironically on the material conditions under which they are produced, distributed and consumed” (30).

Beyond this, one must consider the multiplicity of intellectual and emotional considerations that shape the artistic process and motivate consumers of art. Discourses of the exotic are not likely to capture the full range of value-comprising elements that can be perceived as merging in a single work of art. As David Thorsby suggests, “cultural value...could be disaggregated into several components, including its aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic and authenticity value” (159). Given this breakdown, Huggan’s qualified treatment of postcoloniality

metropolitan *realpolitik*...They are latter-day ‘eloquent orators’ with first-hand knowledge of the empire’s workings, but who use that knowledge to challenge, not endorse, imperial codes [Cheyfitz 1991]” (Huggan 26).

as context and determinant of value, and of professional success, appears to be more fitting than Brennan's. He writes:

Postcolonial cultural production is profoundly affected, but not totally governed, by commodification; it is frequently, but not invariably, subject to the fetishisation of cultural difference; it is increasingly, but by no means irredeemably, institutionalised in Western commercial and educational systems; its value is certainly shaped, but not rigidly determined, by its contact with the global market. (27)

Two additional claims in *The Post-Colonial Exotic* help us readdress Brennan's contention that cosmopolitanism is complicit in preventing the marginalized Other from engaging in certain kinds of literary self-expression because of rigidities imposed by Western hegemonic regimes of value. One of the claims is gleaned from the following passage in Huggan's book: "...mainstream culture is always altered by its contact with the margins, even if it finds ingenious ways of looking, or of pretending to look, the same...For if metropolitan society thrives on the commodification of marginality, it also recognizes, without fully controlling, the changes taking place within its midst" (22-3). This argument could doubtlessly be opened up to lengthy discussion, the kind that is beyond the scope of this presentation. Nevertheless, despite the broad strokes used to assert mutual influence, it is easy enough to grasp the idea that in due course the margins will have an impact on mainstream culture.

The second claim, the more theoretically demanding one, is the notion of the "spectacle of cultural difference," which has been used in studies of nineteenth-century exoticisms to suggest "the concealment of imperial authority [or the inequality of power relations] through exotic spectacle" (Huggan 14-15). A modern variant of this is the very public politics of literary recognition – a product of the global reach of mass media and worldwide mass-market consumption of cultural products. Thus, the "spectacularisation" of cultural difference is descriptively more apt because the marketing hype associated with the commodification of Otherness is a modern phenomenon that emerged from the convergence of the newer forms of telecommunications technology and the culture of celebrity which until fairly recently was almost entirely confined

to the movie industry and related popular culture. Not surprisingly, literary stardom has coincided with the growth in the number and prestige of major national and international awards for literary accomplishments. The changes worldwide in the status of writers and national literatures previously considered as falling outside the domain of Eurocentric literary conventions and interests is matter for book-length treatment, as in James F. English's book, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, as well as in Huggan's work. English is worth quoting here to show that international recognition now has considerable influence on valuation in the home country:

As the pace of economic and cultural globalization has accelerated since the 1970s, ...the national honors which used to serve as prerequisites for 'Nobelization' now themselves often trail behind global consecrations, serving merely as post-facto adjustments or corrections of the domestic symbolic market... (271-2)

While the globalization of literary fame can by no means be viewed as enabling authors to escape entirely the conditions of postcoloniality which continue to restrict – as Brennan, Huggan and English argue – the types of works selected for valorization and canonization in a postcolonial canon, the effects of the cultural and symbolic capital accruing from global stardom can be viewed as abetting the two-way flow of cultural influence between the margins and the centre. Moreover, although Huggan warns against “a naively celebratory global cosmopolitan sensibility in which conspicuous inequalities of technological resources and international divisions of labour are elided, and where the continuing anti-imperialist concerns of contemporary postcolonial writing are emptied out” (121), he also concedes the difficulty of measuring the impact of literary fame on readers. He states, “[O]bviously, the various ideological apparatuses and ‘reading formations’⁵ underlying the canonizing process are much more complex than I am giving the impression here” (119).

⁵ The concept is derived from, T. Bennett's *Outside Literature* (Routledge, 1990).

Huggan admits that the entrenchment of certain celebrated postcolonial writers after winning the Man Booker Prize becomes self-perpetuating, part of the process of “spectacularization”. He is referring to writers like Achebe, Naipaul, and Rushdie, “whose names circulate freely within the media and on school/university curricula and examination lists” (118). Yet rather than focusing on the leverage derived – in commercial and symbolic terms – from the celebrity factor, Huggan emphasizes that “the Prize has participated in a process of canonization which, as such processes will, tends to reproduce the value-systems of ‘culturally and otherwise dominant members of a community’” [Herrnstein Smith 34]⁶ (119). Huggan, in other words, does not appear to consider that fame can lend greater freedom for expressing anti-establishment sentiments and ideas.

In opposition to Huggan, one can take as a starting point Arjun Appadurai’s argument in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*: “commodities ‘constantly spill beyond...specific regimes of value, [so that] political control of demand is always threatened with disturbance’ [Appadurai 57]” (quoted in Huggan 29). A celebrity author achieves a degree of freedom unavailable to lesser-known writers. This freedom, combined with the global reach of media and marketing campaigns (aiming to maximize profit more than ideological conformity) creates multiple audiences, each constructing different sets of meaning for an author and her/his work, and whose values and convictions in general fall outside the hegemonic net of Western social and political beliefs:

Postcolonial literatures in English – to make an obvious point – are read by many different people in many different places...And it would be as difficult to distinguish a single reading public as to identify its location, in part because readers of postcolonial works are part of an increasingly diasporised, transnational English-speaking culture, but most of all because literary/cultural audiences all over the world are by their very nature plural and heterogeneous. Such audiences, according to John Frow, are composed of several different ‘valuing communities’ whose

⁶ Huggan is quoting from B. Herrnstein Smith’s “Contingencies of Value” in *Canons* (U of Chicago P, 1984).

boundaries are necessarily porous and whose interests are far from evenly matched. Audiences, says Frow, arguing in part against Bourdieu, are never fixed; ‘valuing communities’, similarly, cannot be conceptualized ‘in terms of self-contained positional identities’ [Frow 154] – the value ascribed to a literary work is never the more or less direct expression of a single group. (Huggan 30)

The importance of understanding that readers, within and across geopolitical regions, comprise numerous communities motivated by diverse yet overlapping fields of value cannot be underestimated if one is to argue that global markets and mass media are just as likely to enable as disable authentic creative impulses and criticism in works of literature. Well-known authors who manage to combine formal brilliance with a compelling political vociferousness, can draw on and reinforce Saidian “transnational solidarities” despite and because of the mass dispersal of people and ideas. The literary too can function as a context for the ‘communifying’ logic of a chain of equivalences. In other words, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theory (based on Gramsci’s ideas), concerning the partial and incomplete character of politicized identities that can be re-inflected and harnessed into “imaginary unities,” is applicable to the notion of ‘valuing communities’ or ‘reader formations’. Needless to say, this is a form of cosmopolitanism. However, it is not a form that, as Brennan insists, leads to the elision of differences but one that foregrounds – by being thoroughly depicted through writing – shared experiences of oppression, marginalization and other kinds of “syncopated temporalities.”

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