Commonwealth or Common Poverty?: the New Literatures in English and the New Discourse of Marginality

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Abstract
Margins are popular these days. Everyone is claiming them. But one thing remains the same. Colonial and post-colonial literatures remain on the margins. We were marginal to the old critical approaches and we are marginal to the new. The new literatures in English have been discovered as fit subject matter for journals that would never have considered them of interest a few years ago. My problem is with the nature of this interest. To what extent does it represent a genuine discovery of cultural differences and to what extent can it be seen as a new form of cultural imperialism that now appropriates instead of silencing post-colonial literary productions? I am inspired by the new avenues for rethinking the discipline opened up by the pioneering work of critics such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. But I am also disturbed by the implications of some of the work that is now appearing. This paper deals with some of my reservations about the language and approach now being applied to marginal literatures by mainstream critics. It asks about the implications of their quick dismissals of work in the fields of Commonwealth literatures and national literatures and their quick claiming of what they call marginal, minority or third world literatures.
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Homi K. Bhabha, for example, dismisses in a sentence and a half the discipline of Commonwealth literature as an 'expansionist epigone' whose 'versions of traditional academicist wisdom moralize the conflictual moment of colonialist intervention into that constitutive chain of exemplum and imitation, what Friedrich Nietzsche describes as the monumental history beloved of “gifted egoists and visionary scoundrels”'. Nietzsche merits a footnote as the source of the dismissive phrases; those being dismissed do not. Bhabha lumps all practitioners of Commonwealth history and literature together as stereotypically nationalist, expansionist and moralising, denying them the very specificity he accuses them of suppressing, and without providing any evidence for his claims. Such an attitude enables him to concentrate his attention on the work of Europeans and a few privileged
Europe-acclaimed writers of colonial origins, such as V.S. Naipaul and Frantz Fanon. I will deal with the substance of his claims later. What interests me first is the lack of interest in the voices of the colonised – in their version of their experience – and the choice to focus instead on deconstructing the colonialist and neo-colonialist discourse of the oppressors.

Bhabha’s article appears in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to ‘*Race*, Writing and Difference,* an issue that raises important questions but that ignores the contributions made to their consideration by the colonised themselves. In his response to this issue, Houston A. Baker, Jr. makes this point – ‘For me, the signal shortcoming of “*Race*, Writing and Difference is the paucity of Caliban’s sound’.* But Baker himself uses a metaphor that is drawn from European discourse. Despite Caliban’s transformation by New World writers such as George Lamming and Aimé Césaire, Caliban remains an ambiguous symbol for the self-determination of the colonised. The claiming of Caliban was a necessary ideological step at a specific historical moment, but one could argue that that moment has now passed. Furthermore, Caliban cannot simply be used as a synonym for black male: in post-colonial writing, s/he is sometimes white or aboriginal. Neither are ‘black talk’ or dialect the only speech writing variants that centralists have problems understanding. Ironically, Baker’s intervention sounds as establishment-oriented in its concerns as the articles in the issue he criticises, but this irony does not invalidate his point. In fact, it makes it more urgent.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s response to Baker is illuminating: ‘No, Houston, there are no vernacular critics collected here; nor did you expect there to be…. Todorov can’t even hear us, Houston, when we talk his academic talk; how he gonna hear us if we “talk that talk”, the talk of the black idiom?’ Here the omission of black talk is a deliberate strategy of self-censorship in response to the perceived unreceptiveness of the establishment. I think this is a misguided strategy because it allows what should be a dialogue to remain a monologue: the discussion continues within the terms established by the dominant discourse, whether one characterises that as ‘analyticoreferential’, with Timothy J. Reiss, or as the ‘marriage between Reason and capital’, with Partha Chatterjee. Such a strategy cripples at the outset the alleged goal of seeking ‘to understand the ideological subtext which any critical theory reflects and embodies, and the relation which this subtext bears to the production of meaning’. By not addressing the larger frame (of *Critical Inquiry*’s assumptions about what can be said and how) within which they have agreed to allow discussion to take place, they have abandoned this goal before beginning to attempt it.
An acrimonious discussion in *New Literary History* (Winter 1987) takes up this problem, but inconclusively, allowing itself to be side-tracked into a discussion of theory versus advocacy instead of developing an inquiry into the kinds of theory most appropriate to understanding American black literature as another literature of the colonised. Here again, the implicit standard of reference is European. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes: ‘Unlike almost every other literary tradition, the Afro-American literary tradition was generated as a response to allegations that its authors did not, and *could* not, create “literature”.’ If he had seen his own tradition as central to a larger struggle instead of marginal to the U.S. ‘mainstream’, he might have seen instead that the Afro-Americans shared this dilemma with most other colonised peoples. They too have faced the problem of how to dismantle the master’s house when the master’s tools are apparently the only ones available, and they have confronted it in a variety of ingenious ways. Joyce A. Joyce recognises these connections among the colonised, but assumes that ‘the Black American critic – merely and significantly because he or she lives in a powerful country – should be at the vanguard of a world-wide Black intellectual movement.’ There are two problems with this argument, both connected to power. Joyce makes shared ethnicity, rather than the relation to power, her criterion for solidarity, and she assumes that the foundations on which power are based are irrelevant to its exercise. But why should Black U.S. imperialism be any more palatable than White U.S. imperialism?

The challenge for the critic is to find an alternative power base to that which has traditionally fueled imperialist academic endeavour. That base lies in recognising the potential power of comparative post-colonial studies to pose an alternative to traditional English studies. Despite their disagreements, Joyce A. Joyce, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker, Jr., neglect this potential in their common quest for change, as they articulate it in *New Literary History*.

Elsewhere the omission of the perspective of the colonised comes, not from a misguided strategy, but from a wilful ignorance. I encountered this lack of interest in what the colonised had to say for themselves at a conference on ‘The Colonial Mind’ held at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in November, 1986. Several speakers from the United States lamented the absence of novels analysing American imperialism at work abroad. When I pointed out that there were many novels providing just such an analysis by writers in the countries affected by U.S. imperialism, I was told they were not interested in them. What they wanted were *American* (meaning U.S.) perspectives on American imperialism, not Trinidadian, Canadian or Fijian perspectives. Despite all the noise about revaluing the
margins, those historically marginalised remain silent to those who do not know how to hear what they have to say.

The new discourse has been so constituted as to continue to ignore the contributions of the colonised. The interest is in how some of us have been silenced (those of us seen as sufficiently exotic), and not in what we have to say. Recognising this bias, Peter Hulme suggests that the model of 'radical history' contains 'two interdependent but separable moments: first, a critique of existing versions, partly dependent upon, second, the presentation of alternative and contradictory evidence'. Much of the theorising to date has been excessively preoccupied with the first, perhaps because it has already been decided that this should be the first step. And why? Perhaps because of a continuing unquestioned assumption that Europe is the origin of discourse and the colonies merely the branches growing out from that source, perhaps because it seems the more familiar task to critics trained to see the English tradition as central. The post-colonial literatures, when looked at from within their own perspectives, however, do not justify such assumptions.

It is time to take up the challenge of what Hulme labels the second step, a challenge already met by many post-colonial writers, such as Fanon, Césaire, Retamar, C.L.R. James, Lamming, Harris, and Brathwaite, to list a few of the well-known Caribbean names. They provide the 'alternative and contradictory evidence' that we must now study more closely. Peter Hulme has brilliantly analysed the ways in which *The Tempest* inscribes the 'discursive conflict in which a Mediterranean discourse is constantly stretched by the novelty of an Atlantic world' (p. 3). We should be looking more closely at the ways post-colonial writers have re-written that conflict, not only to question the dominant culture's assumptions but also to reinscribe their own versions of possibility. Such a project should work comparatively, to avoid the narrowness that occasionally mars Rob Nixon's fine article, which by limiting itself to Africa and the Caribbean, misses resonances in the play that have been taken up by Canadian and Australian writers.

Even worse, perhaps, than the continuing silence about post-colonial achievements in writing against colonialist discourse, is the temptation for those of us in the ex-colonies to allow ourselves to be lulled into accepting a definition of ourselves as marginalised – a definition which until now we have continued to resist. Now that the marginal is being revalued as the new source of authority in discourse, it is tempting to accept the imperial definition of the colonised as marginal. But this would be a mistake. As a colleague of mine exclaimed in response to a friend's lament over her
marginality as a woman: ‘Women aren’t marginal. They’re bloody well right down the centre of the page!’ The same is true for the post-colonial literatures. From our perspective, we are central. We are where we must begin and we are not marginal to ourselves, however much others may marginalise us economically and politically. To assert our centrality in this way is not to revert to the nationalism Bhabha deplores in the Commonwealth literatures. It is an attempt to appropriate our own discourses as part of a larger attempt to determine the course of our own lives.

The same debate about the appropriateness of ‘minority discourse’ as yet another term for designating marginality occurs in two special 1987 issues of Cultural Critique, where Barbara Christian takes the position I advocate here. As she points out, ‘many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as somebody’s other’. This question of language is important. We must refuse the neo-colonial interpellation that would name us as marginal. Recently, I heard the Trinidadian novelist and playwright Earl Lovelace argue against the use of the term ‘slave’ in relation to the history of the blacks in the Caribbean. They were enslaved, certainly, but they were never slaves, because they never accepted that naming or that condition. Rather, they lived a resistance

all through slavery, carried on in their unceasing escape – as Maroons, as Runaways, as Bush Negroes, as Rebels: and when they could not perform in space that escape that would take them away from the scene of their brutalization they took a stand in the very guts of the slave plantation ... asserting their humanness in the most wonderful acts of sabotage they could imagine and perform.

The word ‘slave’ already implies a dehumanisation and a resignation that accepts the slavemaster’s view of the colonised. Lovelace’s celebration of a history of resistance presents the self-determination of a people who refuse that interpellation

Marlene Nourbese Philip develops this point in an article entitled ‘Women and Theft’. Asked to speak on the theme ‘women and poverty’, Philip began to question ‘how well the words went together’, how they suggested a passive state, a natural condition, and how they tended to ignore how poverty came about. On the other hand, if we start talking about women and theft, she reasoned, ‘we have to start asking questions like who did the stealing ... and what was stolen’. She concludes that

even when we believe we are being objectively descriptive by using a word like poverty, or poor, we continue the myth that poor people are poor because they produce little: we have all, I’m sure, heard the modern variation of that argument about Blacks, native people, women and poor people.
Philip reappropriates the language to serve her interests. She writes that ‘as a writer nurtured on the bile of a colonial language whose only intent was imperialistic, I see no way around the language, only through it, challenging the mystification and half truths at its core’. That is the post-colonial critic’s task too. The theoretical analyses which construct that challenge come from the various Marxist reconsiderations of the role of ideology in shaping cultural experience. But they themselves require transformation when transplanted to new settings.

Colonial and post-colonial writers have tended to ignore the ‘wealth’ hidden in ‘Commonwealth’ to focus on the poverty the imperialist would like us to see: the poverty of our indigenous cultures as well as the poverty resulting from imperialist thefts. In the past, literary critics have tended to focus on the negative aspects of the colonial mentality, seeing it as something inhibiting the creation or survival of an indigenous culture. Australians denigrated the ‘cultural cringe’, Canadians spoke of an ‘inhibiting frost-bite at the roots of the imagination’ and a ‘deep-seated terror’ in the face of nature, and West Indians deplored their symbolic ‘castration’. The new spokespeople for ‘colonialist discourse’, the new champions of the marginalised, continue to stress that poverty, either through directly addressing it as Naipaul does or through implying it as Bhabha does. In ‘Some Problems in Nationalist Criticism’, Bhabha sees that poverty as a myth, but as a very successful one. ‘When V.S. Naipaul writes that “History is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies”, we become aware of the complete success of colonialist values and of the complete despair of the colonised’. Yet one would not reach such a conclusion if one read Naipaul in context. Increasingly the post-colonial literatures themselves are celebrating the strengths of our differences. Our histories contain both oppression and resistance. We make a strategic choice when we choose to stress one above the other. To stress our helplessness and despair is to continue our oppression; to stress our power to effect change is the first step toward making change happen. As the Canadian writer Donna E. Smyth recognises, ‘What I have to do, what we dispossessed have to do, is to take possession of what is rightfully ours: beauty, grace, and the power of articulation’. The shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ is deliberate. Perhaps it is also time to reclaim the commonality of that wealth, a trait the dominant ideology seeks to obscure. We colonised form a community, with a common heritage of oppression and a common cause of working toward positive social change. To recognise what we hold in common is not to underestimate our differences, but to provide us with a context for understanding them more clearly.
There is no shortage of critics to analyse the functions of colonialist discourse, while the various functions of post-colonial discourse continue to go unexamined. Caliban quickly tires of cursing Prospero. His speech is most compelling when he celebrates his own skills and love of place, and when he transforms himself from European creation into an autonomous indigene capable of astounding metamorphosis – into black nationalist or lesbian feminist. I would like to see post-colonial critics using the insights of contemporary theory to explore those of our indigenous/hybridised traditions that positively express our differences.

I do not recognise my work in Homi Bhabha’s characterisation, but it is worth asking what we do when we teach ‘Commonwealth Literature’. The name itself is problematic, carrying a weight of cultural accretion that works against the recognition of differences I am pleading for here. I would prefer to discuss the new Englishes or the post-colonial literatures in English to stress the fissures rather than the unity of the subject. But I do not share Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s reasons for rejecting the term. He writes:

The sometimes vulgar nationalism implicit in would-be literary categories such as ‘American Literature’, or the not-so-latent imperialism implied by the vulgar phrase ‘Commonwealth literature’, are extraliterary designations of control, symbolic of material and concomitant political relations, rather than literary ones. We, the scholars of our profession, must eschew these categories of domination and ideology and insist upon the fundamental redefinition of what it is to speak of ‘the canon’. (‘What’s Love Got To Do With It?’, p. 351).

It is with the vulgar, in its original meanings of the common people and the vernacular, that I would like to see the discipline maintain its connections. Because I do not share Gates’s belief that the ‘extra-literary’ can be separated from the literary, I value a descriptive term that draws attention to the connections between the two, connections too often obscured by traditional and experimental literary discourse alike. It is not ‘the categories of domination and ideology’ that we must eschew; on the contrary, we need the categories to help us understand the experiences. Domination and ideology are real; they exist, in life and in our discipline; and they are what we must combat.

A year after writing these confident remarks, I find Gates repeating his assertions in a new article within a different context and as a result I find myself taking these comments more seriously as a difference in categorising not easily resolved. As Aijaz Ahmad reminds us: ‘nationalism itself is not some unitary thing with some pre-determined essence and value. There are hundreds of nationalisms in Asia and Africa today; some are progressive, others are not’. As a Canadian whose country is on the brink of making a
free trade agreement with the United States in which everything, including culture, appears to be on the table, I put a positive value on nationalism. As an American whose nationality is assured, Gates obviously does not. All the more reason, then, for declaring our cultural baggage before crossing cultural borders into foreign territory. We all speak English, but we use it in very different ways. We, the scholars of our profession, cannot afford to ignore the categories of domination and ideology that Gates would have us eschew. In making and then reiterating this statement, Gates appears to be accepting an assumption that Said advises us to question, the assumption that ‘... the principal relationships in the study of literature – those I have identified as based on representation – ought to obliterate the traces of other relationships within literary structures that are based principally upon acquisition and appropriation’. Formerly colonised peoples know that we ignore those traces at our peril.

As Ngugi wa Thiong’o points out in Decolonising the Mind, ‘the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom’. While we readily accept such a statement in looking at African societies, many members of the so-called older Commonwealth – the settler colonies of Australia, Canada and New Zealand – have difficulty accepting its relevance to their lives. We too have been educated in the violence of those classrooms and continue, even despite our intentions, to perpetuate that violence ourselves. When we teach, we must fight against reinforcing the colonial’s ‘fundamental imaginative relationship with the Imperium’ to try instead to learn, together with our students, how to read and think and speak ‘across and against it’. Is the university’s role to preserve cultural traditions or to question them? Must we choose between preserving and questioning? Whose cultural traditions are we discussing here? – Judging by curriculum requirements, our commitment to affirming the validity of the post-colonial perspectives is still a marginalised position. From that position, how do we make ourselves heard and how do we make ourselves understood? What is the theory of our practice? Does it differ from the Derridean and Lacanian models employed by the mainstream critics who are now staking out the marginalised as their territory? Or to paraphrase Flemming Brahms, do such ‘“civilized distinctions” actually lead us into a state of “ignorance” with regard to crucial aspects of works from the Commonwealth’: Much recent work suggests that they may.

As Gerald Graff and Reginald Gibbons define it, ‘“theory” is simply a name for the questions which necessarily arise when principles and concepts once taken for granted have become matters of controversy’. The centrality of the English canon has been questioned by Marxism, by
feminism and by a series of developing colonial literatures, beginning with American in the nineteenth century. Some of those excluded have now been included, but on what terms? Do we want to set up our own counter canons, or do we want to question the idea of canonicity itself? Are we searching for new ways of unifying our discipline or for ways of living with the fact of its fundamental disunity? What is our discipline?

I work in a university English department. Is my discipline English? I try to teach Canadian literature in terms of its historical, political, sociological and cultural contexts. Is my discipline Canadian Studies? I try to teach the post-colonial literatures, both in terms of their own local specifics, as I do Canadian literature, and in terms of their shared relations to the experience of imperialism. Is my discipline the discourse analysis of the processes of domination and resistance produced by imperialism? Obviously I think it is all of these, but how do I deal with the competing claims of each? Do I try to reconcile them or highlight them, fit them into ever larger patterns or use them to illuminate the contradictions we live with? In writing an article such as this, the temptation is always to synthesize and clarify, yet I believe we must trust the contradictions, allowing them to open up for us fresh ways of perceiving what is and imagining what could be.

In exploring these problems I draw on my experience teaching at the University of British Columbia because I believe we must begin with the local and specific if we are to fully grasp the implications of what we do. I teach in a place where both the local and national cultures are still undervalued, where the majority of professors, in Brian Fawcett's terms, 'retain a fundamental imaginative relationship with the Imperium' and therefore do not see the local culture as a fundamental starting point for thinking about literature. I live in a province where confrontation is the norm, where I am forced into the role of being an oppositional voice, automatically seen as the negative of the dominant culture's positive. In such a context, how can one speak to be heard, and still speak differently? How can one imagine a form of cultural autonomy that will elude the pervasive control from the United States?

In my own recent work I have turned to the analysis of Canadian ideologies, and particularly the distinctive 'Tory strain' as mediated through literature and the works acclaimed as part of a Canadian canon, in order to see how Canada both participates in larger North American ideological patterns and deviates from them. Such work requires an interdisciplinary context and begins to take on immediate practical implications at a time when the 'economic integration' of North America seems imminent.
At the moment, we have two parallel discourses for examining the relations between what Said has termed 'the text, the world and the critic' in the aftermath of the age of imperialism: the mainstream reconsiderations of colonialist discourse, which to a large extent continue imperialism's 'bracketing the political context of culture and history',27 and Commonwealth literature, which is sensitive to such contexts but does not speak of them in ways that are accessible to its natural allies. In Baker's terms, these are the 'rationalists' and the 'debunkers'; in Said's they are the 'excluding insider[s] by virtue of method' and the 'excluding insider[s] by virtue of experience'.28 The first tends to assume 'the unity of the “colonial subject” ' (JanMohamed, p. 59), the second to stress its specificities at the expense of any cross-cultural comparisons. The first privileges European views of the 'Third World', itself a term of European invention and limited usefulness, now being rejected by those it would seek to designate; the second privileges nationalist perspectives at the expense of a critique of imperialism as the logical extension of capitalism. Neither provides a way out of the dilemmas outlined above. Each reinforces in its own way the logic of the dominant discourse.

But we also have critics who seek a way out of this 'Manichean discourse' (JanMohamed) - through Baker's 'triple play', Hulme's 'radical history', Mocnik's 'materialist concept of literature';28 and the reseeing of intelligibility as a problematic rather than a value.29 Said's list of possible strategies at the end of 'Orientalism Reconsidered' could serve as a summary of many of the points made in this article:

A need for greater crossing of boundaries, for greater interventionism in cross-disciplinary activity, a concentrated awareness of the situation - political, methodological, social, historical - in which intellectual and cultural work is carried out. A clarified political and methodological commitment to the dismantling of systems of domination which since they are collectively maintained must, to adopt and transform some of Gramsci's phrases, be collectively fought, by mutual siege, war of manoeuvre and war of position.30

What we must continue to fight are essentialising oppositions that pit a 'colonial mind' implicitly against an imperial mind, implying an equivalence that masks the real inequalities of power that determine these two states and implying that all colonial experiences are similar. If the sound of the black voice has been silenced in much of the new writing on race, the settler colonies, with their large immigrant populations and their native peoples, remain absent from discussions of colonialist discourse. It still seems easier for critics to discuss the cultural impositions of the British empire on civilisations established along lines recognised, if not admired, by European
models – that is India and Africa – than it is to consider the transportation and transplantation of English in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Caribbean. We must ask why this should be so, while demonstrating that the post-colonial is not a uniform field.

In cultivating this uneven field, we must avoid the false universalisms of Nick Wilkinson’s rationale for a method and the false nationalisms that identify Britain, rather than the imperialist structure of capitalist relations, as the enemy. As Chatterjee points out, ‘the political success of nationalism in ending colonial rule does not signify a true resolution of the contradictions between the problematic and thematic of nationalist thought’ (p. 169). To understand these contradictions is our most important task. In recognising the asymmetry of domination, we can better understand how language and literature may be used to maintain dominance.

In the past, the universalising drive of traditional English studies appropriated or silenced the differences of the post-colonial literatures. The deconstructive strategies of many of the new experts on colonialist discourse appear to be continuing this process. If one asks to whom are the majority of these articles addressed, the answer seems clear. They address the other, the imperialist, the white liberals who wish to wallow in pleasurable feelings of guilt about their terrible past, while enjoying the memory that once they were all-powerful. As Gates admitted, they are writing for ‘Todorov’ and the establishment his name represents. If we wish to read writers who address themselves to the people in colonial and post-colonial situations, we must turn to Ngugi, Lamming, Lovelace, Fawcett, Smyth and all the other writers and critics who seldom receive notice beyond Commonwealth circles. It is our duty to publicise and continue their work, through questioning and challenging the mystifications that are used to oppress us.

At first I was puzzled by the seemingly gratuitous attacks on Commonwealth literature in the work of critics who would seem to share our goals of challenging the hegemony of an imperialist, universalising discourse. The questions, ‘who writes?’ and ‘what is being written on whom?’ have helped me focus the problem. While race is the highlighted difference in these writings, class remains the hidden difference, Gates’s reply to Joyce makes this distinction clear. He proudly proclaims his blackness while defensively insisting that his class is none of her business. He implies that his authority to speak derives from his blackness (his participation in black culture, not his race, since race is an ideological construction rather than a biological fact), yet his rhetoric suggests otherwise. His rhetoric lays claim to the authority of the universities where he has studied and where he teaches (Cambridge and Yale) – an institutionally based authority
independent of actual expertise (he admits that black literature was hardly recognised as an authentic object of study let alone understood at Cambridge). His rhetoric also lays claim to the authority of his maleness – a socially reinforced authority that allows him to patronise Joyce in ways he would never try with another man. Gates willingly uses the privileges of class and gender to silence opposition to his version of the difference of race. I think this violent reaction to Joyce and the quick dismissal of Commonwealth literature are related.

Race is rapidly becoming an academically respectable difference; class and national self-determination (except, of course, when it is American self-determination) have not yet been satisfactorily recuperated in the way that race – at least in the Critical Inquiry issue – has. It is useful here to remember Ernesto Laclau’s distinction:

A class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized.  

Judith Williamson expands on the implications of this insight:

The whole drive of our society is toward displaying as much difference as possible within it while eliminating where at all possible what is different from it.... Our culture, deeply rooted in imperialism, needs to destroy genuine difference, to capture what is beyond its reach; at the same time, it needs constructs of difference in order to signify itself at all.  

The post-colonial literatures represent that genuine difference which an imperialist culture fears. The establishment must therefore ensure that post-colonial self-representations continue to be ignored, while representations of them are reconstructed within the academy as safe alternatives to their real threat. Bhabha’s, Baker’s and Gates’s writing sometimes serves this function, however unwillingly and unwittingly. Gates’s recent work suggests a shift in strategy: ‘I once thought it our most important gesture to master the canon of criticism, to imitate and apply it, but I now believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures’ (‘Authority’, p. 41). Nonetheless, the focus on race as an ideological construct and especially on the psychological roots of racism in the white psyche address a difference only to defuse its radical potential. The connections between race and class and access to power remain submerged. The discipline of ‘Commonwealth literature’ is
potentially a threat because it tries to address these issues, however inadequately.

If our work is to be genuinely productive, we must see it as 'part of a larger political program of cultural transvaluation'. As Mocnik points out, the contradictory task of bourgeois dominance - a homogenization respectful of the regional discursive heterogeneities - is conveniently tackled by the imposition of the national language as the general matrix of the mutual translation of (heterogeneous) local discourse' (p. 175). If we do not wish to be part of that process, we must recognise that the new Englishes do not form one English, that they do not derive simply from one source, and that they are unlikely to form a unified whole for which a single theory could suffice. We are on the verge of something new, trying to rethink our assumptions at the same time as we rethink the boundaries of our work, the nature of our subject, and the nature of ourselves as subjects and the objects of our studies. Dieter Riemenschneider's reminder is timely:

Only when comparative investigations into their historical context, which include an understanding of their differing aesthetic traditions, have reached a stage of information and thus critical awareness transcending by far our present knowledge, will there be a sound basis on which to erect a specific aesthetic of the 'new' English literatures.35

All the critics whose work I have discussed in this paper share this search for a 'sound basis'. Like Riemenschneider, I believe it must be found in the new literatures themselves. Like Bhabha, I believe we must reject 'traditional, academicist wisdom'. If my interest in how English has been transformed under various conditions of resistance to oppression around the world makes me 'vulgar', a 'gifted egoist' and 'visionary scoundrel' in the eyes of the new establishment, that is a price I am willing to pay. But I believe that if those of us who seek real changes in the organisation of knowledge can agree to explore the field cooperatively, we may discover other options.

NOTES

3. See Rob Nixon, 'Caribbean and African Appropriations of The Tempest', Critical Inquiry, 13 (Spring 1987), p. 576, for the argument that 'The Tempest's value for African and Caribbean intellectuals faded once the plot ran out. The play lacks a sixth act which might have been enlisted for representing relations among Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero once they entered a post-colonial era....' While others might argue that this silence is
precisely where new appropriations might wish to begin, Nixon is correct in noting the 'declining pertinence' (p. 577) of the play to contemporary concerns.


11. Rob Nixon concludes that ‘Given that Caliban is without a female counterpart in his oppression and rebellion ... it follows that all the writers who quarried from The Tempest an expression of their lot should have been men’ (p. 577). Such a statement ignores Lamming’s recognition of Miranda as in many ways Caliban’s counterpart, explicitly in The Pleasures of Exile and implicitly in Water with Berries. It also ignores Suniti Namjoshi’s ‘Snapshots of Caliban’ from The Bedside Book of Nightmares (Fredericton: Fiddlehead & Goose Lane, 1984), where Caliban is feminised and develops a close relationship with Miranda, as well as Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners and Audrey Thomas’s Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island, which develop Miranda’s resistance to Prospero’s oppression. For more on this issue see my ‘Re-writing The Tempest’ in World Literature Written in English, 23, 1 (1984), pp. 75-88. What Nixon mistakenly sees as problems in the source play, an ideologically-informed analysis would identify as characteristic of the society – of the choices it does and does not see – in its reading of the play. These choices become clearer when we see that other societies have indeed read them as options presented by The Tempest.


23. Brian Fawcett, Cambodia: a book for people who find television too slow (Vancouver: Talon, 1986), p. 148. The full quotation reads: 'In the latter part of the twentieth century, a colonial is one who retains a fundamental imaginative relationship with the Imperium'.

24. Robert Bringhurst, Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), p. 102. The full quotation reads: 'So while most of my colleagues in the Canadian and American poetry racket devote themselves to speaking for and within the colonial culture to which they belong - and which, of course, contains a great deal of profundity and beauty - I have spent my own life learning to speak across and against it'.


28. Rastko Mocnik, 'Toward a Materialist Concept of Literature', in Cultural Critique, 4 (Fall 1986), pp. 171-89

29. Helen Tiffin and I make a similar list in the Introduction to our forthcoming book Decolonising Fictions (Dangaroo Press), written in 1985. For further discussion of 'the ways in which a reconsidered, or revised notion of what might be called a post-colonial intellectual project is likely to expand the area of overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies', see Edward W. Said, 'Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World' in Salmagundi, 70-71 (Spring-Summer 1986), pp. 44-64.


31. Nick Wilkinson, 'A Methodology for the Comparative Study of Commonwealth Literature', in The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 13, 3 (April 1979), pp. 33-42. This article may well represent the kind of 'traditional academicist wisdom' Bhabha has in mind. Wilkinson makes four pragmatic assumptions that have been undermined by both nationalist African critics such as Achebe and Chinweizu and by European theorists such as Foucault, Barthes, Derrida and Macherey. While sharing Wilkinson's desire for a clearer statement of the assumptions underlying what we do, I find his assumptions, as stated in this article, completely unacceptable, indeed, a perfect summary of everything I oppose.


33. Judith Williamson, 'Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization' in Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 100-101. See also her statement: 'The need of our society both to engulf Others and to exploit “otherness” is not only a
structural and ideological phenomenon; it has been at the root of the very development of capitalism...' (p. 110).

34. John Carlos Rowe, ‘“To Live Outside the Law, You Must Be Honest”: The Authority of the Margin in Contemporary Theory', in Cultural Critique, 2 (Winter 1985-86), p. 67.


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