Expanding Horizons

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Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol19/iss2/4

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Abstract
I have always valued the variety of course options we had as students at the English Department at Aarhus University. When I enrolled in 1989 I thought it was marvellous to be given a chance to lose myself in a particular time, place and situation through subjects like 'Drama in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Period', 'America in the Great Depression' or 'Introduction to Caribbean Literature'. By the time we became postgraduate students most of us had come to specialize in one direction or another, and my interests had clearly developed within the field of postcolonial literature.

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Afterwards, thinking about what spurs you on in a particular direction, it can be hard to pinpoint any concrete influences; either it touches you or it does not, just as a teacher can bring life into a subject to one student and not to another. Hence, the discussions I had with one of my fellow-students concerning our academic preferences were rather fruitless. She blankly refused to take any interest in post-colonial studies, asserting her disinclination to ‘feel sorry for all these oppressed and marginalised victims’. The question I asked myself was: were my interest in post-colonial literature then merely the result of an innate or socially conditioned aptitude for sympathizing with ‘victims’ and ‘losers’? A less simplistic study of post-colonial issues than identifying or even reversing the traditional dichotomy of ‘light – darkness’, ‘superior – inferior’ became related to an immensely fascinating and compulsive questioning of old certainties which inevitably called for the (re)construction of more complex truths and identities.

The gradual realization of how the colonial powers have monopolized history and culture in most parts of the world is indeed an unsettling experience – also to one who grew up outside the Commonwealth orbit – because in the process of understanding, one’s notion of universality tends to become reduced to ethnocentrism, or a power issue. My own cultural certainty as a blue-eyed European with deep roots in a homogenous, independent nation had never suffered any fractures or caused me any psychic unease comparable to what is typically expressed in post-colonial texts. Yet my national heritage is by no means unquestionable or unproblematic. On the contrary, ought I not to
question a cultural tradition which has relied as much on the Manichean world view as any other imperialist power? The colonial discourse that taught my parents’ generation about Denmark’s ‘proud’ history as a colonial power is hardly unproblematic: ‘Now our only colony is Greenland, and in this country we have carried out a great piece of work. The indigenous population has been protected from ruin and also lifted culturally’.

The days of old-time imperialism have long since been left behind us, and even since the early days of decolonization much has been achieved to correct the wrongs of the past. Marginalized voices are speaking back alongside established discourses of power, and the theorists are speaking of pluralism from various schools of thought prefixed with post-. As the traditional polarities of ‘oppressor – oppressed’ have become less marked, it is tempting to complacently ignore the pain, rootlessness and injustice that still exist as a leftover from a colonial past. This applies in particular to those of us who would like to think we live at a safe distance from third world poverty and economic oppression, but looking at our own cultural doorstep it appears that the power of social forces, culture and history also works in more subtle ways here.

In Denmark, despite a general sense of homogeneity, of a proud history and cultural certainty, there is a reservoir of fear and insecurity that, if provoked, flares up and turns quickly into intolerance and xenophobia. The objects of this latent racist hostility are the nation’s refugee and migrant minority groups, who have recently been the targets of a massive, aggressive campaign by one of the nation’s leading tabloids. The strategy was one of emotional provocation and subversive criticism of the governing system, bringing back the traditional cultural opposites of ‘advantaged and disadvantaged’, ‘weak and strong’, ‘ignorant and ingenious’, but with an ironic reversal. Thus the mainstream Danes were projected as being marginalized by the political correctness of ‘the establishment’ (the Danish equivalent of the Australian Chardonnay socialists) and being left to feel naive and foolishly kind as the shrewd immigrants and so-called refugees are laughing at them, exploiting the welfare system and services.

The noble, self-created role of the tabloid was of course to reveal the reality of the economic abuse and the cultural threats linked to the foreigners’ ‘invasion’ of Denmark. And the paper’s sales were booming! When the beast within is let out in the profitable pursuit of easy targets and scapegoats, there is no interest in exploring the reasons behind the perceived problems. In fact, is it not possible to create myths by formulating problems that are rooted in your own prejudice? Much of the debate on ‘foreigners’ in Denmark has presented them and their cultures in a negative light – as a negative image of western culture. Social inequality and chronic unemployment are dominant features of the (post-) industrialized West that breed a personal and cultural sense of inferiority.
among the disadvantaged, and then it is convenient to reassert one’s sense of self and place in the social hierarchy through negating relations with a perceived subordinate group.

In Australia, a nation that can be argued is founded on double guilt (dispossession of the indigenous peoples and extreme punishment of a significant number of Anglo-Saxon/Celtic convicts), there is a constant striving for reconciliation and unity that also bears witness to a problematic construction of (national) identity. Here I have experienced the white Australians’ difficulties in coming to terms with a painful past. Over the years the cultural sentiment has changed insecurely from deep shame of colonial/convict roots to excessive pride in and exhilarated celebration of the same roots (particularly in connection with the Bicentenary in 1988); from politically correct goodwill towards amending the ‘problems’ with the Aboriginal population to indignant frustration when this goodwill fails to create the desired result of silence. I remember overhearing a conversation a few years ago between two women in a theatre audience in Perth during the performance of Sally Morgan’s first stage play, which dealt with the forced removal of Aboriginal children that has since been labelled cultural genocide: ‘Well, surely it’s terrible what the whites did to the Aborigines, like taking their children away, but what can I do about it? Done is done’. The comment by that Australian woman reminded me of my fellow-student’s comment, and it suggested to me that one can never put a lid on the issues of marginalization and colonial discourses. The wounds from the past may never heal, but the insecurity they lead to in terms of identity, I am sure, can be eased as each individual learns to deal with his memory bank of place and history in a way that denies a monopolized construction of reality.

Postcolonial studies to me became more than simply an exotic subject to become absorbed in or a cause with which to ‘sympathize’. An inspiring teacher and opportunities to travel helped to expand my horizon by challenging the traditional notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’. I have come to appreciate the culturally multidimensional experience, and now as I have left my native country and become an immigrant, I shall myself have to learn to live at once with that which has been left behind and that which is here and now.

NOTES

1 My translation from a Danish primary school geography textbook, 1993