THE TRANSNATIONAL IMAGINARY: CULTURAL SPACE AND THE PLACE OF THEORY

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> If migration is the popular form of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism is its elitist version. Both are products of the same global economic system. But since transnational capitalism also breeds isolation and anxiety, uprooting men and women from their traditional attachments and pitching their identity into chronic crisis, it fosters, by way of reaction, cultures of defensive solidarity at the very time that it is busy proliferating this brave new cosmopolitanism (Eagleton 2000: 63).

Introduction

My discipline is English, a discipline viewed as the study of a specific language and its literature, or perhaps even more reductively, as a means of obtaining certain language skills. But while language skills certainly are obtained on the courses taught, English at a university level has surprisingly little to do with proficiency training as such. Instead, the discipline focuses on how cultural values are produced and maintained in and by cultural systems, such as "language" and "literature," and how these systems are connected to other fields of discourse within a society. Naturally, this is done with varying degrees of theoretical awareness and ability. However, it has always been a major component of English Studies, even if the discipline engaged these issues quite uncritically in the beginning. As Terry Eagleton points out, English as a discipline began as a project of comparative cultural politics where the "quality of a society's language was [thought to be] the most telling index of the quality of its personal and social life: a society which had ceased to value literature was

one lethally closed to the impulses which had created and sustained the best of human civilization" (Eagleton 1983: 56). That this "human civilization" just happened to be English was overlooked by the originators of the discipline; it was simply considered a lucky coincidence that England had a world-spanning empire and therefore could carry the torch of civilization supposedly handed over by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Since these ideas were hegemonic in a real sense, other nations followed suit. Humanism became a way of organizing consent. Literature became *the* vessel of national values, a discursive formation which had the simultaneous ability to express a local and national identity that would prove valuable to school authorities and agencies of public education (it gentrified the middle classes and taught the working classes reverence for a literacy that was "theirs" if only by proxy), at the same time as it managed to hypostatize that national identity (English, French, German, etc.) into something abstract and universal. This construction of the human would teach the colonials that truth and humanity were virtues that "civilized" nations shared, while simultaneously justifying what now is understood as "the expansion of Europe".

Today some sense of self-consciousness or self-reflexivity is called for when we speculate in historical destinies, our own and those of other people. The way in which humanism became part of the same cultural revolution as the rise of modern imperialism ought to humble scholars of culture everywhere. But whereas the positivism with which culture was theorized from the 1870s up until the Cold War is increasingly difficult to maintain, some of the ideas that were brought on by imperialism are extraordinarily hard to shake off. Whereas we may quite categorically claim that Shakespeare did *not* "invent the human", as Harold Bloom has suggested in his international bestseller with that title (Bloom 1998: 13-4), Shakespeare certainly provided a matrix for the way in which English constructed the human on university courses all over the world. But it does not help to say that literature has an ambiguous relationship to truth and value. There is a sense in which the very idea of humanity has become a European construction, an ethnocentrism of such grand proportions that its ethnic origins seem lost in an ocean of universality. English certainly had a role to play in this historical development. But it has also provided a space of criticism against precisely that development. One result of this critique are the recent and ongoing "culture wars", a series of ideological "wars" which themselves are signposts of far more wide-ranging set of disenchantments. For English, the evacuation of a hypostasized universalism has meant an expansion of the notion of literature as well as the values that literature was thought to contain. As Andrew Delbanco put it in *The New York Review of Books* a couple of years ago, "the English Departments

have become places where mass culture-movies, television, music videos, along with advertising, cartoons, pornography, and performance art – [are] being studied side by side with literary classics" (Delbanco 1999: 32). For Delbanco, this spells the decline of traditions that were the very seams, if not fabric, of local, national cultures, and which functioned strategically as a reinforcement of civilized ideals. Hence Delbanco's title, "The Decline and Fall of Literature", and its unfortunate allusion to empire, which is inherent in the very notion of culture that emerged with the founding of the English Department at the end of the nineteenth century. Globally, of course, the expansion of the word literature (and civilization) is a welcomed corrosion of the West-ism that habitually underlies the discipline's thinking in these matters. When notions expand they become more inclusive (until their usefulness runs out, which is another matter altogether). But the ideological reproduction of certain values and beliefs continues also after an adjustment to new conditions.

Just as English had an important role to play in the production of English national culture and its constructed, universal version (the human), so does the English Department paradoxically play an important role in what Khachig Tölölyan has called the "transnational moment" (Tölölyan 1991: 4). In Eagleton's exposé over the rise of English as a cultural force, he comments extensively on the "refreshingly unhypocritical" attitude of late Victorian public educators, who never shied away from expressing the need to control the public through education (Eagleton 1983: 50). They worked towards replacing the old religious ideologies that were impotent in the new, industrial era. In doing so, they held an eighteenth-century, civilized ideal of "organic community" as the "touchstone" of their ideological reproduction. "Literature" was thought to contain this ideal and provided society with a safety valve against the harsh and contradictory social reality of the times. The Victorian ideologues for whom public education aimed at reinforcing national sentiment through identification with a cultural cannon – people like Matthew Arnold, H. G. Robbins, and J. C. Collins – obviously did not think of their own cultural production in terms of ideology, but they were quite frank with the function and anticipated outcome of their cultural enterprise.

In our "transnational moment", things are quite different. This moment allegedly marks itself off from the hegemonic era of English which it now understands critically. Where the disciplinary fathers of English worked towards unifying a culture through national sentiment, the transnational imaginary works, as Khachig Tölölyan notes, within a "semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugees, guest workers, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (Tölölyan 1991: 4).1 In a language that celebrates homelessness, hybridity and plu-

rality, diasporic communities are the conceptual "other" of nation-states and thus "the exemplary communities of the transnational moment" (ibid.). We must note Tölölyan's use of the word *exemplary* here, for it highlights a normative move that is just as ideological as the Victorian guide books of disciplinary development ever were: transnational social spaces are exemplary because they make no pretense to territory, they make no claim to power. They are simply the deterritorialized "other" of whatever else it views in terms of a territorialized "same". This argument is a development of the universal humanism that once produced English. However, it remains engaged in the theoretical enterprise of expanding the *space* of culture at the cost of denying its *place*.

Part of the appeal of the transnational for English lies in its recognition of cultural impurities, where texts such as those enumerated by Delbanco may be studied together not so much for their value in the formation of cultural canons, but more for what they have to say about the cultural processes that involve and shape the deep-structure of identity and belonging. That these cultural roots have less to do with blood and soil than once was thought does not come as a surprise to anyone. As James Clifford argues, the "old localizing strategies – by bounded *community*, by organic *culture*, by *region*, by *center* and *periphery* may obscure as much as they reveal" (Clifford 1997: 245, emphasis in original). The transnational is consequently often seen as something that transgresses the limitations of the binary thinking of borders and boundaries that seem to impinge more conventional and traditional ideas of culture. But we must also be sensitive to what remains the same. Clifford typically stresses "culture", "center", "periphery" and "community" as important ideological markers. He does not put the accent on the words *bounded* and *organic*, which of course are the words that do the ideological work in the sequence. It is as an *organic* and *bounded* community that a culture becomes authentic. It was this authenticity that was sought for by the founders of English, because, as Eagleton argues, it was the ideological prerequisite of that "'dramatic enactment' rather than rebarbative abstraction" which ensured the connection between representation and "felt experience" (Eagleton 1983: 52). For the transnational imaginary, that authenticity is sought not so much in Shakespeare as in postcolonial dramatizations of Shakespeare; not so much in postcolonial experiences as in the conceptual models that allow the making of academic sense out of something called the predicament of culture. Although the intention of such work is benevolent and democratic enough, even radical at times, there remains something aggressively imperial and historically ironic in the attitude that the peripheries of the Western educational and academic centers are best understood through applications of Shakespeare or Derrida. Also here, a

certain whiff of ethnocentrism lingers in the air, as the "dramatic enact-ment" of literature is fixated to one's own "felt experience".

The research agendas and perspectives of this growing body of work on the transnational within English have been multi-faceted and heterogene-ous, obviously. Nevertheless, what I will gather here under the rubric of the transnational are conceptualizations and articulations of culture that deploy a sense of the global in the local. This is arguably not how the term is defined in the authoritative literature. Indeed, as Ulf Hannerz suggests, the term *transnational* may even be thought of as a mild reproach of "the rather prodigious use of the term globalization to describe just about any process or relation that somehow crosses state boundaries" (Hannerz 1996: 6). With my approach, I will consequently not do justice to the inc-reasing research on transnationality that has appeared in Migration Studi-es and related disciplines. Thomas Faist, for instance, argues that there is a "marked difference between the concepts of globalization and transnatio-nal social spaces" in that the global overlaps the transnational "but typi-cally has a more limited purview" (Faist 2000: 192). I am not trying to contradict Faist by suggesting that the concepts are the same. What I am after here is one of the spaces in which the overlap occurs, namely the aca-demy (which is the place of theory), and the consequences that this over-lapping has for the production of a transnational imaginary. Akin to the hypostasized "human" of late Victorian humanism, the *exemplary di-asporas* of the transnational moment have their own very specific place and identity. And despite the invocations of hybridity that usually are part and parcel of this celebratory stance, the transnational imaginary idealizes its own subjectivity in a cultural arena that like the British Empire now spans the entire globe.

Notwithstanding these prefatory caveats, the conflation of the global and the transnational is arguably one of the implications of Hannerz's own theorization. Hannerz's approach to the transnational in terms of a "global ecumene", whereby transnational connections affect what he calls "the organization of culture", is a case in point.[2] Steven Vertovec, another important scholar of transnationalism, similarly argues that the term "de-scribes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have be-en globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-span-ning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity" (Vertovec 1999: 447-8). The transnational is in both these senses a place and a space in the world; it seems to be able to simultaneously organize culture (it has agen-cy, it instigates activity) and provide an arena in which this culture takes place. Both these uses of the term only make sense in relation to a global

perspective from which the generation and course of transnational spaces are viewed and grasped. Yet there is a marked reluctance to account for the place of this vantage point. This reluctance is precisely my topic here.

Transnationalism as the Ecumene of Modernity

As Hannerz indicates, the word *ecumene* is derived from the ancient Greek where it signified the known and inhabited world. But it also means the Greeks regarded in the context of an overall development in human society. In this sense the word is related to that of civilization, which we all know requires a collective subject with whom identification can be made. This meaning is evident in the transferred sense of the word, where ecumene denotes the inhabited world (or a part of it) as known to or embraced by a later civilization or culture. The word ecumene thus implies one culture looking at another, usually temporally and spatially distant, in order to understand itself. Implied is therefore also the meaning of raising such a genealogy. Typically, this is done in the context of empire and religion, where a past is produced to secure an identity in the present. Interestingly, this could be said of all the examples of quotations given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in its gloss on the word. The transnational would in this sense be the ecumene only in relation to someone or something else; a culture for which it makes sense to talk about global cultural flows, about creolization at the center, the withering away of the nation-state, and the virtuality of the arena in which all this takes place.

Here, of course, is where the invocation of the transnational superficially differs from past announcements of new ecumenes; the global ecumene embraces cultural difference and hybridity to such an extent that it becomes integral to its own self-understanding. Indeed, Hannerz suggests that this hybridity has become the very "landscape of modernity" (Hannerz 1996: 44). But for this to be true, modernity needs to be constructed in ways that are reminiscent of the way English discovered that the content of literature was "human life" and "felt experience". In a sense, modernity becomes a Spenglerian *Kulturgarten*, a culture garden where cultures spring mysteriously into being without any relationship to one another. Rather than a set of economic, social, aesthetic, judicial and psychological processes, and despite Hannerz' territorializing metaphor of a "landscape", modernity becomes by definition a space, an ever-widening gyre, where the "trust in abstract systems" produces automatic membership (ibid.: 46).

Similarly, Vertovec's assumption that these processes take place on a planet spanning, universal, yet virtual arena ought to make us cautious of what exactly we are talking about. Can we really presuppose that *modernity is at large*; that villages in rural Indonesia or Nepal participate in a global

flow of culture to the extent that it makes sense to talk about them as being *in* modernity? If an occasional video night in Katmandu is what we mean by being in modernity one may wonder what it would take to get out of it.

When we review the process described by Hannerz, historically and in the context of English Studies, we sometimes talk about modernity in terms of a self-conscious construction or "self-fashioning". The latter term is derived from Stephen Greenblatt's now classic study *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From Moore to Shakespeare*. In this book, Greenblatt gives an account of how the rising English middle class defines itself in the available contexts of the middle ages. He points out that, because "the early modern period produced a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities", there came to be a recognition both of "selves and a sense that they could be fashioned" (Greenblatt 1980: 1). Although this recognition was done in a spirit of autonomy and optimism, it involved subjecting oneself to available identities determined by the intertwined forces of institutional networks – family, religion, state – none of which produced any unfettered subjectivity. Through Marx, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and above all Clifford Geertz, Greenblatt produces powerful readings of More, Tyndale, Wyatt, Spenser, Marlow, and Shakespeare that place their texts in conjunction with relevant contexts. In other words, acts of self-fashioning *within* literary works are related to strategies of self-fashioning available in the extra-literary milieu.

In Greenblatt's readings, then, the Renaissance subject comes into view through the various discourses that allow for its articulation. These discourses rely on a difference that can be thought of in terms of an imagined distance to earlier identities and the social practices related to them, which when viewed from what is defined as new, the humanist position, seem to negate individuality and inwardness. Literature, which in medieval times was a cultural sub-system of religion and as such expressed a collective subject identifiable with the Church, suddenly becomes a vehicle for self-expression. But the paradox at the heart of the matter is this: just as the possibility for self-fashioning is articulated in the writings of Spenser and Shakespeare, so do the institutional forces and constrains on the individuals increase. It is as if the cultural systems suddenly recognize the existence of individuals and reinvent themselves to meet the challenge. The self-fashioning alluded to in Greenblatt's title becomes inseparable from being fashioned by existing social institutions. The function of literature must therefore be disengaged from its perceived content; Shakespeare may not have invented the human as we know that entity today, but the disciplinary discourse that made social use of Shakespeare certainly was part of that invention.

The following diagram is taken from Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Bürger 1984: 48). It is designed to explain how the notion of autonomy becomes associated and eventually synonymous with art. The table is "non-synchronous" in the sense that each phase may be said to coexist with the other phases so that exchanges can occur both inside and outside each stage. The tabulation takes into consideration that the individual who emerges as the absolute horizon of art in the bourgeois era has its origin as far back as in the princely courts.

	Sacral Art	Courtly Art	Bourgeois Art
Purpose or function	cult object	representational object	portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding
Production	collective craft	individual	individual
Reception	collective (sacral)	collective (sociable)	individual

Fig 1. Non-synchronic development of the function, production and re-ception of art in Western societies (Bürger 1984: 48)

In Bürger's typology, art begins its journey towards autonomy as "sacral art" during the "High Middle Ages", where both production and reception is "institutionalized as collective". In this period, art serves as a "cult object [...] wholly integrated into the social institution 'religion'" (ibid.). The concept of art has not reached any sense of self-definition yet, but is viewed as part of a totality by which it also is defined, namely religion.

During the early modern period, however, "courtly art [...] constitutes itself as a distinct social subsystem", in which production is individualized but reception remains collective, where its function is defined as the glorification "of the prince and the self-portrayal of courtly society" (ibid.: 47). It is in and through the inception of national literature that the burgeoning nation-states are able to reproduce their cultural and linguistic self-identity.

Finally, when both the production and reception of art is individualized, art enters its "bourgeois" phase, according to Bürger, the hallmark of which is "the objectification of the self-understanding of the bourgeois class" (ibid.: 47-8). In this framework, "[t]he novel is that literary genre in which the new mode of reception finds the form appropriate to it", namely an artistic production by individuals, for individuals, and whose final signified is the discovery of individuality in the context of civil society (ibid: 48).

That society is the modern, capitalist, democratic, and *civil* entity we associate with certain European nations and the United States, and whose chief characteristic we could claim (following Hannerz) is the conviction of its own abstract existence. The founders of English already sensed just how abstract this entity is, which is why they were so averse to the "rebarbative abstractions" of certain theorists and longed for the organic assurance that their readings of texts seemed to produce. It is also that society which Tölölyan finds challenged by the transnational moment of diasporic homelessness. How we understand this challenge (if at all it is a challenge) is largely dependant upon how we understand the social imaginaries that allow us to construct modernity in a very specific way.[3] Also here, literature plays a much larger role than is generally understood. According to Benedict Anderson's famous argument on the spread of nationalism, the novel as a cultural form is a pre-condition of the modern nation. Together with that other form of "print capitalism", the newspaper, the novel is a distinct cultural form in which a certain narrativity enables us to constitute something like a "society". This imagined world, "conjured up by the author in his readers' minds [...] a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time, is a precise analogue of the idea of a nation" (Anderson 1991: 26). This omniscience creates the reassurance "that the imagined world [of civil society] is visibly rooted in everyday life. [...] [And so] fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (ibid.).

It is of course one of the great ironies of Anderson's theory that this process developed not in the metropolitan centers of Europe but in its imperial periphery. In a footnote to his discussion of this, Anderson complains that it is "an astonishing sign of the depth of Eurocentrism that so many European scholars persist, in the face of all the evidence, in regarding nationalism as a European invention" (ibid.: 191n9). However, it is in Europe that the link between the imagined, anonymous collectivity of the nation is developed genealogically, as a sign of civilization and humanity. It is first when nationalism is made into an *ecumenical* affair that literature is able express the "felt experience" and "organic" reality of the citizen. The paradox is that it expresses this social and collective content in terms of a social imaginary, where the "felt experience" of the individual necessarily needs to be supplemented by the abstractions of literary and theoretical conventions. The dialectic involved forces the citizens to forget their own individual experiences and remember instead the supplementary representations of those experiences. In other words, from the moment we become modern (and only in modernity is such an anonymous collective "we" possible), we are launched in to the empty homogenous time that is

the same everywhere, that deterritorializes our experience into something abstract, homogeneous and globally available, and which, as Anderson points out, "engenders the need for a narrative of identity" (ibid.: 205). Literature is in this sense the answer to how the individual accepts being forced into a social order, a sociality. The important point is not the content of the imaginary but the function and form that it takes. Here is where the transnational moment might not be all that different from the national moment that proceeded it; both are based on the celebratory self-fashioning of the individual.

When literature turns out the kind of narrative "by which society", as Hayden White puts it, "produced a human subject peculiarly adapted to the conditions of life in the modern *Rechtsstaat*" (White 1987: 34-5), we must take into account the abstract and supplementary nature of this change in the social imaginary. The new and powerful development is that the form supplements the content, so that, in fact, the form *is* the content. From now on, our readings confirm "us" and the "imagined community" to which "we" belong independent of where "we" live or who "we" are. This "organization of culture", to refer back to Hannerz's phrase, is clearly marked by virtuality, by a movement through "homogeneous, empty time" that enables the construction of the modern subject as an individual in a deterritorialized, abstract space of culture. This is the very nature of the ideological processes set about and intensified by the institution of literature. But once we recognize that the immediacy with which we read a novel is illusory, then it follows that we need a little more than simply the feeling of authenticity to generalize our own experience into the experience of a global ecumene.

The Global Ecumene and the Transnational Bourgeoisie

In our "transnational moment", we no longer seem to have the nation-state as our primary concern. Nor do we seem to be inclined to locate cultural origins in order to explain identities and cultures. And we seem even less bent on discovering the location of culture in any bordered territory. In fact, the focus on the modern *Rechtsstaat*, which at once was cultural and political, seems to have become a focus on culture only. But as Masao Miyoshi argues, "[t]he bourgeois capitals in the industrialized world are now as powerful, or even more powerful, than ever before. But the logic they employ, the clients they serve, the tools available to them, the sites they occupy, in short, their very identities, have all changed" (Miyoshi 1993: 732).

Whereas the "imagined community" of the nation was dependent on the nation-state for its political authority and protection, the transnational imaginary derives its power from different grounds. This place is the

transnational social space of a new bourgeoisie where a certain homogeneity is developing amongst its members who are not necessarily busy reading novels, but who participate in powerful patterns of consumption in which, as Miyoshi argues, "brand names command recognition and attraction [...] [and] where commodities are invented, transported, promoted, day-dreamed over, sold, purchased, consumed, and discarded" (ibid.: 747). Those commodities now include images (and possibly also the imaginary itself). This is, according to Miyoshi, the culture of the transnational class. The migrants and diasporas of the world become emblems of privileged and deterritorialized subjectivities, whose connections to marginality are tenured and enshrined through a public culture that includes television, film, newspapers, literature, and ... theory. Marginality itself becomes a reified entity, a kind of cultural capital, which, when not localized in specific histories and contexts that evolve what Marx called "the first premise of all human history", namely "the existence of living human individuals" (Marx and Engels 1988: 37), easily transforms into a fetish to be consumed by the privileged. These patterns of consumption feed effortlessly into an "imagined community" which like a perfume bottle produces powerful sequences of transnational "borderlands" (Tokyo, London, New York, Paris, but also Chiapas, the Maquiladoras, Honduras and Peru). The question, Miyoshi suggests, is whether "the intellectuals of the world are willing to participate in transnational corporatism and be its apologists" (Miyoshi 1993: 742).

The answer seems to be a self-evident "no"! But if one reads, for instance, *Modern Fiction Studies* Spring 2003 special on transnationalism, and particularly Paula Moya and Ramón Saldívar's introduction, "Fictions of the Trans-American Imaginary", the answer becomes rather complicated. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Moya and Saldívar offer the "transnational imaginary" as an operative concept for the construction identity. Literature is called upon once again to produce the social cement sought for by Matthew Arnold. Their maneuver is *ecumenical* in the very sense of trying to unify the canonized voices of Emerson, Melville, and Whitman with alternative canons (both past and contemporary) into a hybrid chorus of ethnic and minority alternatives. These alternatives, they suggest, would better underwrite the contemporary demographics of the United States. In doing so, they want to replace the parochial "New England, Protestant, northeastern regionalist paradigm" which so far has controlled the agenda of literary production with a "Pan-American hemispheric context" (Moya and Saldívar 2003: 3).

With the same zeal and almost with the same frankness as the Victorian public educators, Moya and Saldívar recognize a need to reshape the official culture of the United States. Starting out critically, then, they ask

about the conditions under which the category of the national produces that link between a basic political economy and culture that in the past has allowed for the co-articulation of modernity and the American nation. With an unintentional irony, however, that link is also defined in transnational terms as a link between England and New England. But far from being a hybrid, fluid, non-binary and emergent transnational social space, this space is described as monological, binary, white, male, and modern in the old nationalist kind of way. The necessity to counter this cultural product is understood in both Liberal and Marxist terms. Frederic Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping" is evoked as a means of buttressing this new and developing subjectivity, a subjectivity, which Moya and Saldívar define as "what some are today denoting as the 'postnational' American subject – but that we are calling the 'transnational' subject – in the very midst of that subject's formation" (ibid.). In the same breath, however, liberal political ideology is invoked through Will Kymlicka's discussion of a "community of fate". But there are some real problems with this theoretical maneuver. Kymlicka's version of multiculturalism is easily equated with the American nationalism that Moya and Saldívar want to challenge. As Seyla Benhabib argues, Kymlicka's multiculturalism "force[s] him into an illegitimate reification of 'national' above 'ethnic' and other forms of identity" (Benhabib 1999: 407). This is so because Kymlicka theorizes multiculturalism in terms of "societal culture", a culture which shares a "fate" that is "territorially concentrated, and based on a shared language" (Kymlicka 1995: 76). However, such cultures do not exist in any other sense than as ideology. This is precisely what the English department once was created for: to set up a sense in which a "shared fate" could be imagined and represented that would appeal to colonials and the working classes alike, and which would manufacture the consent of the exploited in the name of a universal humanism. But it must be clear to everybody by now that a society does not have *a* culture.[4]

From the point of view of political legitimacy, Kymlicka's multicultural liberalism promotes itself as everybody's culture, something that seems to be a constant preoccupation of bourgeois culture. To explode this belief has been one of the preoccupations of critical theory for more than a century. This is partly the reason why theory has been resisted in English departments all over the world, and why the "fall into theory" sometimes is experienced as a loss of culture. In the "transnational moment", however, theory stands the danger of being co-opted in the ideological mission of creating a "trans-national imaginary", a space in which difference is experienced as social capital only.

The Victorian handbooks for English teachers talked about how Eng-

lish would ”'promote sympathy and fellow feeling among all classes'”; and how the teaching of literature would open up a ”'serene and luminous region of truth where all may meet and expatiate in common'” (Eagleton 1983: 51). If anything, this is the ”community of fate” treasured by Kymlicka. But as Eagleton argues, such a shared fate is created to legitimize a certain authority:

> Literature would rehearse the masses in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling, persuading them to acknowledge that more than one viewpoint than theirs existed – namely, that of their masters. It would communicate to them the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements, and, since reading is an essentially solitary, contemplative activity, curb in them any disruptive tendency to collective political action (ibid.).

This is how literature becomes cornerstone of the modern social imaginary. Here is why Hannerz can proclaim a ”global ecumene” which includes beggars in Calcutta, a Swedish teacher in cross-cultural communication, as well as Salman Rushdie, even if the only perceivable meeting point of these people would be one of Rushdie's novels.

But again, we need to understand that the content and form of literature is not the same as its *function*. Once literature functions as a reinforcement of subjectivity, we may properly speak about a subject in modernity. What is problematic with Moya and Saldívar's venture is their insistence to make literature transcend the opposition at the heart of a now global modernity. To produce a ”community of fate” that somehow would be all-inclusive would in actuality imply not a post-national but a post-ideological society. And literature is not beyond ideology. When they argue that the transnational imaginary provides ”a more accurate understanding of who we are and a more truthful account of how we got here” and that this will involve a ”change [of] our sense of national identity and the canon of American literature” (Moya and Saldívar 2003: 6), we need to ask the now classical postcolonial question ”for whom”? Who identifies with the canon of American literature? Can we easily distinguish this ”transnational ecumene” from the ”transnational corporatism” Miyoshi is talking about?

Academic Transnationalism and the Politics of Culture

The transnational imaginary is in this sense a theoretical stance and an identity in one and the same package, which, as Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* tries to ”think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha 1994: 1).

It is of course not difficult to sympathize with the ideological underpinnings of this project. But that the focus on difference has to center on the "in-between" spaces of the subaltern in order to provide the new bourgeoisie with "innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" seems rather like a re-routing of an old Victorian strategy. The "cross-border spatialities" that develop in the wake of this "transnational corporatism" are, as Saskia Sassen suggests, "partly deterritorialized and partly deeply territorialized; they span the globe, yet they are strategically concentrated in specific places" (Sassen 2000: 24-5). There is therefore no reason to leave the issue of territory behind in these exchanges. The center, as always, pays the fiddler and calls the tune (which explains the existence of so-called called "world music"). Such a strategic concentration is not only a question of the space economy of leading information industries; we definitively have to include the various culture industries and, perhaps more importantly, academia in what Sassen calls "the spatialities and temporalities of the global". It is therefore important that the celebratory rhetoric with which the transnational is engaged in English Studies is supplemented by a more critically committed reading practice.

Indeed, what the transnational imaginary seems to do is to push the field of focus away from places and into a landscape of metaphorical relations, where the location of culture becomes a spatially ungrounded trope, a floating signifier set against enlightenment values (including the nation-state), and where one avoids complicity with the superstructures of society only through acts of self-deconstruction. In this work, the marginal and non-Western is obviously center-stage. But only for those who produce their subjectivity with the aid of the canon of American literature. As Timothy Brennan argues in an article on cosmopolitanism:

[t]he telos of the imperial project is reached when the third-world subject is able to deconstruct the epistemic violence of colonialism only by way of Continental theory. What cosmopolitanism unconsciously strives for is a stasis in which the unique expression of the non-Western is Western reflexivity – and automatically – the local self exported as the world (Brennan 2001: 675).

Brennan links transnationalism with cosmopolitanism through globalization, an interpretive move for which he finds justification in the powerful historical connections between global centers and local peripheries since the inception of capitalism. By proclaiming a public diasporic space, the deterritorialized nation "is for the first time plebeian, nonwhite, working-class, and globally dispersed" (ibid.: 674). But only superficially so. For while it remains open to "the disjunct options enjoyed by the individuals in local settings", these groups are rarely political constituencies.

Instead they are co-opted by the center's powerful need for creolization and its continued production of the "new". Real politics obviously never enters the picture when the Mexican-American performance artist, El Vez, negotiates his cross-ethnic translation of geopolitical displacement. And to rediscover the territorializations of culture seems to be the greatest challenge for the emerging paradigm of transnational English Studies.

NOTES

1   I am using the term imaginary in the "loose but nevertheless techni-
cal sense" described by Moira Gatens in her book *Imaginary Bodi-
es: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*, "to refer to those images, sym-
bols, metaphors and representations which help construct various
forms of subjectivity" (Gatens 1996: vvi). As Gatens argues, these
processes are often plural and unconscious. They are available in
"ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of
social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status
and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment" (ibid.). Unli-
ke Gatens, I do not protest the equivalence of the concept of the ima-
ginary to that of ideology. Gatens objection to this move is that the
social imaginaries necessarily are plural, hybrid and contradictory
and therefore not amenable to the Marxist or post-Marxist concept
of ideology. This, however, is precisely my point; literature (in its ex-
panded sense, the one derided by Delbanco) provides a society with
such ready-made symbols and representations that we may properly
speak of an "imaginary resolution to real social contradiction". Tho-
se contradictions are obviously hybrid and contradictory. But just li-
ke religion, literature has the power to concretize and make manifest
the abstract and imagined (humanity, for example) in such a way
that the contradictions of the social are supplemented by symbols,
themes and plots whose truths are closed to rational argument.

2   Without irony, Hannerz exemplifies this global ecumene with "so-
meone in a south Swedish village [who] turns out to be a teacher of
intercultural communication" (Hannerz 1996: 7).

3   Charles Taylor defines modernity as a set of "social imaginaries"
which construct practices and institutional forms that allow us to
construct "society as an 'economy,' an interlocking set of activities
of production, exchange, and consumption, which form a system
with its own laws and dynamic"; but in whose midst the individual,
as a secularized and rational consciousness, is as central as a sun in a
solar system (Taylor 2002: 105). Interestingly, Taylor advances this
view in a reading of Alexander Pope's epic poem *An Essay on Man*.

4   Benhabib puts it rather succinctly: "[t]here are British, French, Alge-
rian nations and societies that are organized as states; but there are
no British, French, Algerian 'societal cultures' in Kymlicka's sense"
(Benhabib 1999: 407).

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