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Teaching the Canon

David Palumbo-Liu and Dr. Paulo Lemos Horta

The debate over the emerging Global Canon falls within the scope of the academy, comprised of individuals who play a critical role in determining the leading works of art and literature. We engaged two professors in a discussion of the ever shifting, and increasingly global nature of literature curricula in their college classrooms. We questioned them about the specific goals of their literature classes, what role non-western writers played in class discussions, and how the diverse backgrounds of their students influenced the classroom dynamic. We began the conversation, in the form of an e-mail exchange, moderated by World Policy Journal editors, with a simple question: What goals do you have as professors of world literature, with respect to your students' curricula and their lives beyond the classroom?

PALUMBO-LIU: First, to present literature in its historical context, regionally, nationally and globally, to show the con-

nection between the particular “local” situation of the work of literature, its relation to broader contexts and even the notion of “universal” values. Often this is dialectical—by discussing the particular and the universal, we find our senses of both modified. Second, to present literature as literature; that is, as a specific way of putting language together that is unique to literature. This is done with due respect to the fact that different cultures have alternative discourses, which approximate what western society understands literature to be. I attempt to raise the question regarding the kinds of social and cultural functions literature performs, and how these functions are manifested elsewhere. My hope is that if I meet these objectives, they will have a kind of ethical effect—that [my students'] assumptions about the world, of how “other people” act, about other values, ways of thinking, would be different.

HORTA: I agree with David. There is an ethical component to the study of literature and foreign literature in particular, a thinking through of assumptions pertaining to others and other cultures. Historically, in the postwar United States, comparative literature has been concerned with the task of fashioning world citizens. I think we must ask critically what it might mean to be a citizen of many cultures, and of the world. In my freshman seminars on literature, we read seminal texts by philosophers and political theorists on cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

In this context, my work is born of the conviction that curricula must play catch up to the cross-cultural make-up and curiosity of students, and the cities they inhabit. The cities where I have taught—Vancouver and now Abu Dhabi—have a higher percentage of foreign-born residents than New York or Los Angeles. I believe university curricula must do justice to these cities as sites of cross-cultural exchange. The students are Eastern Europeans interested in Latin American or Asian culture, or Latin Americans interested in the Middle East. In many instances, students are already the product of two or more formative cultures. The goal of my literature curriculum is to foster, channel and discipline the cross-cultural curiosity students already display in their everyday lives—consuming manga, music and Bollywood.

PALUMBO-LIU: I very much like Paulo's point about the shifting identities of college-age students. They certainly are very diverse, and show the effects of global mobility of ideas and people. That said, I think it is also important to note that their diversity is brought about in different ways. There are those of the elite class, and then those who are the first members of their families to attend college. I try to engage all students in puzzling out this situation and use

literature as one way to tap into issues of history, culture, and identity. The Canon has always been used to fortify some sense of national cultural identity. Now, with a slowly broadening Global Canon, new senses of exactly what Paulo says about world citizenship are coming about, and this has an effect on our re-assessing national and cultural identities.

My teaching has actually changed because of ideas that have come from international students with mixed backgrounds. Two examples come to mind. A Korean American student told the class about traveling for the first time to Korea and staying with her cousin. She said she was amazed that her cousin and her friends knew more about American pop music than she did. This student went on to do a study of the kinds of cultural knowledge that students her age had of America. The second example was a course I teach every year called Ethnicity and Literature. Many years ago I happened to have both a student from South Asia and from West Africa, who criticized the fact that my reading list was all U.S.-based. I invited both to give presentations on how the idea of ethnicity appeared in their respective cultures, and from that point on have always included authors from outside the United States.

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL: Are there any texts you use that are both truly global and highly influential?

PALUMBO-LIU: Let me give two examples: Yasunara Kawabata's "Snow Country" and Emile Habiby's "The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist." They both register the influence of western literary forms, and incorporate them for very different purposes to comment on their particular national, historical, political and cultural issues. For Kawabata, it is the slow penetration of western modernity (in the shape

of cultural shifts as well as military and economic) into the remote regions of the nation. For Habiby, it is the dire and impossible situation in Palestine. Although Kawabata's writing shows the influence of elements like Russian short story forms, it is distinctly Japanese in sensibility. Likewise, while Habiby makes very clear allusions to Voltaire's "Candide," it is clear that Voltaire's attack on optimism is used to comment on the mid-20th century historical and political conditions in the Middle East.

The Western Canon is slowly beginning to include non-western works, but mostly through, for example, Anglo-speaking post-colonial works, like Arundhati Roy's "God of Small Things," and literature in translation where, of course, the West still figures prominently. Less common are works that have little or no western presence, even as a trace of former presence.

HORTA: The question of foundational texts of global influence has arguably transformed departments of national literature. Departments of English now encompass World Literature in English and there are comparable debates on the extent to which departments of French should remake themselves as Global French Literature. And certainly, as David's examples demonstrate, the Western Canon has become increasingly globalized. Even the student who encounters a more traditional Western Canon in the classroom—Homer, Dante, Cervantes—is likely to be exposed to a new set of concerns. How might we question the epic as a form and category, reading "The Odyssey" in light of "Gilgamesh"?

World literature, in the sense currently deployed by leading scholars, encompasses influential texts that have circulated outside their languages and cultures of origin. Yet is there a comparative study of world

literature that truly transcends Europe? A keynote address at the 2010 meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association noted that for all the talk of the globalization of the Canon, the discipline of comparative literature remains overwhelmingly Eurocentric, measured by what is

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taught in and published by the leading programs and journals in the field. Perhaps change is at hand. New programs in world literature and literature unanchored from a national tradition expressly break with Eurocentrism as a norm.

That is not to say we are on the verge of an agreement on the foundational texts for a Global Canon. It has become a commonplace to state that each canon of world literature reflects its distinctive time and place to serve a particular audience and ideology. The world literature of mid-century Chinese or Soviet literary magazines may not resemble world literature as viewed, say, by anthologies commissioned in Sweden or the United States today.

PALUMBO-LIU: This is obvious, but perhaps worth repeating: The book publishing industry and reviewers have a huge part to play in generating novels, publicizing them, and what's more, keeping certain titles in front of the public eye by alluding to them constantly as points of comparison and reference. This I am sure also colors the ways people write. There is, in short, a global reference text. Slowly, authors such as Chinua Achebe have made their way into it, and therefore into the curriculum. But more difficult writers, like Kenzaburo Oe, have yet to appear in the Canon.

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL: Why does one text circulate as a work of world literature and not another?

HORTA: That is one of the key organizing questions that I ask in my freshman world lit seminar. I like to couple Milan Kundera with Bohumil Hrabal, preferably a recognizable text such as “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” with “Too Loud of Solitude,” a dark novel about Prague that students are likely to find foreign. Kundera, the Czech in exile in Paris, now writes in French, and prefers the French translations to his own Czech originals as the “definitive” editions of his work. His essays on world literature help shape literary debates on the concept and are reprinted in the *New Yorker*. His novels reference Homer, Beethoven’s late Quartets,

Diderot—a canon familiar to the Western European reader. Hrabal is the author who did not leave home, compromised with the regime and is most likely encountered in Czech or Slavic studies. Such pairings draw out the tensions between the concepts of literature as representative of the nation and a national canon, and as a refraction (however skewed) of that culture abroad. In the Czech Republic, Hrabal is revered as a national author and Kundera treated somewhat more ambiguously (in Prague bookshops he is listed not under Czech writing, but as *exilova*). In English-language bookstores intended for tourists, of course, Kundera reigns supreme alongside Kafka, who wrote in German, as exemplary of Czech writing. ●

—edited by Yaffa Fredrick
and moderated by Caroline Sousloff