

Reading for the Minor: Methodological Considerations in the Work of Paul Beatty, Erika
Lopez, and Beau Sia

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Florence Johnson, who saw it coming.

Abstract

This project attempts to identify and mitigate one problem that arises when comparatists neglect to consider their own methodological situations in relation to the texts they compare. The comparative literature research presented here emphasizes comparison as an interpretive process that must begin with a thorough critique of the comparatist's own reading circumstances; that is, it suggests how comparison should explicate the affinities between reader and text before it emphasizes affinities between texts. The explication process outlined here is termed "reading for the minor," and this project examines selections from three contemporary authors, Paul Beatty, Erika Lopez, and Beau Sia, to show how the concept of minority is integral to both the production and reception of texts in comparison. Understood as an entangled reading process that exposes negotiation as a key method for subjective formation, reading for the minor analyzes the role of authority in interpretive strategies while it promotes the political reality of plural interpretations. These interpretations derive from networked readings and readers, and point to a reading social that situates hermeneutic practices within a hegemonic domain. Investigating limitations imposed by literary categories including genre, representation, and history, this project posits work by the three aforementioned authors as examples of minor literary production as well as examples of work that invite minor readings. The works' multiple minor configurations point to this entangled reading process that binds readers to their texts and sets the process of comparison in motion.

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INTRODUCTION

As I was formulating my ideas for this project, I was thinking about the relationship between research and pedagogy, how teaching becomes both the motivation and testing ground for new methodologies. With this still unstructured awareness guiding my approach to teaching literary and cultural studies, I discovered that my teaching could only go as far as my students were willing to learn. This late-arriving revelation aroused a developmental consideration of my classroom structure. I had been thinking of my teaching as the central point of the classroom experience, that if I was interesting, organized, and intelligent enough, the students would naturally participate in the plan I had set up, and everyone would succeed. I thought of myself as a benevolent master, ready to help my students cultivate what turned out to be a narrowly defined sense of academic achievement. What I was less cognizant of were my students' own senses of agency and their expectations for self-fulfillment. Granted, talking about student agency often seems oxymoronic. Many students remain unaware of the connection between self-actualization and school performance, or, if they have realized that they have some say in their education, are unsure how to articulate their needs. Thus, part of my naïveté came from my own experience as a student, where I too learned to be submissive and accepting, rather than suspicious and engaged.

As I continued to think about my teaching responsibilities, however, I saw how my skills had been changing over time, and noted that I had gradually changed my role from master to participant. Increasingly, my students had become more instructive, and this observation culminated in a realization that the classroom space was more organic,

more flexible than I had previously imagined. Students were responding to my overhauled teaching methods and course material in a variety of ways, many of them unexpected, some of them unwanted, and a few unprecedented. One student in particular stood out as a representative of the ideas I had been forming, and he helped me develop an important connection between research, teaching, and learning that I had been sensing but not understanding.

This particular student seemed average at first. He was in one of my introductory cultural studies classes, in his late teens, friendly and cool. He had a common name, but it stood out as especially ethnic at our predominantly white university. He seemed like an all-American student, usually garbed in university-emblazoned athletic wear, and he sprawled in his chair, just like many of the other young men in the class. During the first few weeks, however, he firmly established himself as a deft critical thinker while many of his classmates struggled with some of the fundamental concepts that undergird cultural studies. This impressive student could casually negotiate complex theoretical problems, and he often catalyzed discussions on sensitive topics. When other students bristled because conversations about social injustices revealed popular, politically incorrect prejudices, this student calmly explained how systematic processes of racism, sexism, and classism could make discriminatory contexts seem banal. He offered productive examples to illustrate key concepts of ideology, rhetoric, and discourse, and as discussions wound down, he sometimes summarized his points with the brusque but insightful declaration that “This is America. Shit’s fucked up.” Struck by his ability to break rarified ideas down into student-friendly aphorisms, I encouraged him to expand

his points rather than retreat into the fecklessness that often accompanies newfound intellectual sobriety. He animated under such encouragement, leading class discussions with shining wit and thoughtful attention to others' comments.

But he was also one of my most frustrating students. He did not complete most of the writing assignments. He never took notes and seemed not to be in possession of the required course texts. To make matters worse, he seemed very comfortable with his course participation and did not respond to my requests to meet and discuss his performance. After being a valuable part of our class for most of the term, he ultimately disappeared right before the final. Vexed by the situation, I reluctantly recorded a failing grade for him at term's end.

I suppose every teacher has a story like this; she laments that the student whose potential rang loud and clear chose the lowest levels of achievement. The fact that I could not catch this student, could not convince him that following the rules would bring him personal satisfaction and a line of credit that would extend into his professional life, forced me to re-evaluate how learning processes inform teaching processes, rather than the other way around. This re-evaluation focused the blurry link I had established between research and teaching and shifted my concern from creating learning spaces to recognizing them. The important thing I had failed to take into account with this student was his ability to learn on his own terms. When I realized that his sense of agency did not depend on my helping him to discover it, I understood that he had made a choice to link his actions to a thorough understanding of the very ideas we had been exploring in class.

I remember this anomalous student not because he failed, but because he demonstrated that the course's vital concepts had very little to do with the notion of homework.

Superficially, this student's story lends credence to the oft-touted existence of a systemic gap between performance and achievement in college education. Many critics decry the current state of student assessment that rewards effort over mastery, and a variety of new educational models seek to disambiguate assessment policies in this regard. In some ways, the project I am proposing here aligns with many of those new models. But more than the breakdown of pupil/coursework or even pupil/teacher relations, this story invites a closer examination of the discursive positions those relations occupy. If we start by thinking of classroom dynamics as a microcosm of larger social structures, we can begin to understand the role that authority plays. Thinking through Louis Althusser's postulation of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, we see how the classroom operates as a mechanism of state discipline, interpellating all participants as they respond to the university's administrative call. Even though my student failed to perform his assigned duties, this framework conscripted him as successfully as any other student.

Hegel's master-slave dialectic may help us consider the relationship between teacher and student. Subjectivity, according to Hegel's model, requires mutual recognition between two self-conscious entities. The problem with the master-slave relationship is that since the slave is a thing, an object existing at the discretion of the would-be master, he cannot develop a self-consciousness that could thereby recognize and validate his relationship with the master. The presumed master, then, is no master at

all. The slave, aroused to self-consciousness by his circumstances, rejects his thing-hood and takes up his subjectivity, facing his master and engendering their struggle for dominance. While the relationship between teacher and student may not involve a struggle unto death, it does require the same mutual recognition. Therefore, so long as the teacher tries to control the relationship, she cannot truly occupy the role. A student like mine drives this point home. By claiming his own self-awareness and opting out of an objective position, his refusal becomes the meeting point where we recognize each other as subjects.

Viewing this situation through Althusser's ideological lens, we see the arrangement of classroom positions shift significantly. Teacher and student no longer inhabit a top-down authoritative paradigm, but a mutually dependent ideological system. Integral to this system is the notion of normalization, which accounts for expected behaviors within an otherwise infinite array of potential behavioral choices. In Hegel's schema, subject and object sublimate one another in a historical push and pull of dominance and submission, the result of which is constant revolution, each historical moment dragging vestiges of the ones before it in an upward spiral of human activity. In the classroom, the relationship of subjective teacher to subjective student results in a clash of wills that generates learning. In other words, my student does not fail as a student but takes a negative approach to affirming his normalization as a student.

A further illustration will add a literary tone and lead us to this project's emphasis. Recall the scrivener in Melville's famous story who prefers not to perform his assigned tasks and languishes as a mark of state discipline. Wasting away by degrees,

from one dead-end occupation to the next, Bartleby brings images of the grimmest bureaucracies to mind, one machine fruitlessly toiling amongst endless machines. Bartleby's story, however, is directed toward a reader who must do something. She must gauge the distance between passivity and activity. In this story, the reader sees how passive resistance both reinforces and subverts state control, how the story itself is an interpellative negotiation not meant to defeat the interpellative process, but to call attention to it. Reading the story opens up a space for these considerations and provides the terms for their engagement. The process of reading, therefore, is the fundamental relationship between subjects, and this project takes its place among those studies that negotiate reading strategies. In the spirit of Bartleby, this project states a preference for the staunch immobility of the reading experience while it reinforces the authority of legibility; that is, this project calls for a liberated reading within the confines of a normative educational experience. On this point my student serves as a perhaps reluctant exemplar by negotiating, by refusing to refuse.

We might also think of this refusal to refuse as an effect of being minor, and here again my student can add some insight. While he presented himself as an average-seeming college student, others in the classroom readily appreciated how different he was. His ethnic heritage, his elocution, and his academic performance helped him stand out as a minority among the majority of his peers. More than that, however, it is his reading perspective that bespeaks minority. He reads the classroom from a minor perspective in order to establish his own agency. He navigates the boundaries between engagement and resistance in a way that reflects his plural allegiances to himself and to

the educational endeavor he helps to administer. Further, from reading his story here, we see how reading is itself caught up in a process of minority, how a negative application of normalizing principles creates a story that underscores self-awareness rather than assumes it. We understand, through reading, that my student's negative performance stems not from an inability to navigate those boundaries correctly, but from a sense of minority that obliges other participatory modes.

His story frames the interdependent concepts of minority, performance, and interpretation. Their interdependency is reflected in an entangled reading process that exposes negotiation as the key method of subjective formation. Accordingly, this project investigates configurations of minority as they affect reading. It begins by examining the role of authority in the reading process and outlines some of the political consequences of challenging authoritative readings. It then explores the ways in which minority undergirds the organization of reading strategies. Minority, as used here, describes the multitudinous varieties of subjective experience that are masked by dominant hermeneutic practices. This masking hides the political reality of plural, minor readings. Hegel's dialectic, informed by the Haitian revolution, provides a mechanism through which to think about the stakes of unmasking, of revealing repressed self-consciousness. In the chapters that follow, I will explain how reading can reveal its minority. Hence, reading for the minor starts with a critical *explication de texte* that draws out subjective experience through formal principles. The political stakes of minor readings help to determine which are useful for effective participation in what we might call a "reading social," that aspect of the social imaginary that utilizes texts for making cultural meaning.

To start, the first chapter “Comparing the Minority Literature” looks to a discipline whose historical role has focused on the reader. Comparative literature offers a unique view into reading because it imagines the reader as the arbiter of form, as opposed to form inhering solely in the text. In comparative study, the reader organizes textual value, and as her gaze falls on particular texts, her reading delimits the very notion of literature. Minority enters the history of literary studies when it symptomatically arouses anxiety in the reader, and the discipline is shaped by anxious shifts in and from minor perspectives. This chapter then applies reading problematics to methods of comparison that derive from para-literary practices, particularly modes of *creolité* and hybridity. Looking to the French Caribbean and its relationship to the U.S. as a model for literary history, this chapter elaborates how processes of minority affect literary production and circulation.

“Paul Beatty, Myth, and Resistance,” the second chapter, introduces the first of three case studies that exemplify minor readings. Selections from Beatty’s work use concepts of myth and resistance to examine how socio-historic structures produce and transform minor generic inventions. Focusing on genre, this chapter looks at the relationship between myth and literature in an attempt to uncover some of the literary historical gaps in African American literature and to discover their meaning for a reading public whose history relies largely on imagination. Beatty, himself a minor author in the African American literary canon, makes significant generic changes in his body of work, moving from performance poetry to written poetry to novels, and these changes suggest that minority requires a constant shifting of perspective coupled with an unrelenting

desire for literary authenticity. Myth, one of the mechanisms used to transmit African American literature and history, figures as a site for contemplation on the nature of history itself, especially as it pertains to a dispossessed, dislocated people.

In “Erika Lopez and the Politics of Space,” the problem of dislocation is taken up again, but this time under the rubric of physical and cultural space rather than history. Resisting the imposition of authoritative reading, minor reading finds and magnifies those textual spaces that hint at a deeper connection between a live text and a careful reader. Using illustration, performance, prose, and new media, Lopez posits the text’s frame as a repository for those minor spaces, and intensifies the spatial relations between text and reader. The visual aspects of her work interrogate the boundaries between active reading and passive spectatorship, and they, in turn, support the written and performative content. As a multimedia author grounded in narrative, Lopez discusses the challenges of producing authentic rather than stereotypic material in the face of a consumerist culture heavily influenced by racist, classist, and sexist imaginations. Some of the artistic styles Lopez uses emphasize the difficulties of reading, and remind the reader that the stakes of interpretation are always high. Negotiating legibility is one of the key features of reading for the minor, and Lopez’s work articulates the encounter between representational limits and possibilities. When she invites her readers to join a monstrous “M-pire,” Lopez also explores the possibilities for a minor collective that can transform modes of production and circulation.

The fourth and final chapter, “Positions, Negotiations, Beau Sia” builds on the previous chapter’s ideas about textual performance. Beau Sia’s performance poetry

opened the door for an acting career that has evolved in minor ways. The physicality of his poetic performances lends itself to a genre-morphing reading that crosses high and low art boundaries and sets the tone for understanding his dramatic performance choices. The roles Sia has undertaken as an actor span multiple genres but are all anchored by his satiric, at times sardonic movements that speak to the necessity of negotiating a professional artistic life. Focusing on the numerous positions he holds, changes, satirizes, and laments, this chapter submits his work as an embodiment of minority in all the senses we have thus described. Sia's work demonstrates the kind of critical self-reflection one sees in derision. As Edouard Glissant has explained, derision is a type of resistance that recognizes the impossible circumstances under which it occurs, and Sia presents a humorous refusal to work within the prescribed limits of genre, offering the reader a chance to see how minority is not just a state of existence, but also an ethical choice for working, for making art. The sheer amount of movement Sia expresses reflects a flexible subjectivity that constantly flouts categorical borders in search of more effective ways of being at the same time that it acknowledges the power of those borders.

Ultimately, reading these three authors coincided with a desire to look beyond the contemporary fascination with glib satire to a more poignant, and in some senses, more desperate call for recognition and political awareness. While the three authors presented here are certainly witty, even biting so, their wit seems born more of contention than frustration. Making work that resists the categories into which it might otherwise so easily fall, they remind readers that minority is itself an unending process of refusing to refuse. Rather than make a case for reception theory, or fall guilelessly into a hermeneutic

morass, this project seeks to put texts and readers together for an analysis of reading as a mode of resistance that can only occur within asymmetrical social discourses. My student's creative refusal serves as a reminder of the risks inherent in normalization, and it is with an evolved pedagogy in mind that I continue to think about being minor.

CHAPTER 1: COMPARING THE MINORITY LITERATURE

Harry Levin, prominent comparative literature scholar and president of the American Comparative Literature Association from 1966 to 1968, related a dream that has since become lore in the field.¹ The dreamer, who was the wife of a comparative literature graduate student, dreamt that Levin and Renato Poggioli, both lauded Harvard professors, had arrived at the couple's house dressed in movers' coveralls prepared to, as the dream-husband reported, "compare the literature." This story, passed down through various essays, sparked much conversation about the nature of comparative study. The dream, heavy with psychoanalytic import,² says quite a bit about the culture of academia, particularly at a prestigious university such as Harvard. The wife dreams, perhaps anxiously, about the kind of work her husband's graduate career entails, thereby revealing a common confusion about what it means to *do* comparative literature. She probably wonders how, and to what, literature is compared. In the dream, the husband's intellectually domineering professors seem to invade their house, while he casually

¹ The version of the dream referred to here appears in "Comparing the Literature," Levin's 1968 address to the ACLA.

² In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan describes a moment of waking to a knock on the door, the real knock preceded by a dream knock. Lacan explains the uniqueness of this moment, noting that external reality seems caused by an internal one; that is, the dream knock seems to cause the real knock. This waking moment is then loaded with psychoanalytic impressions stemming from the collision of the conscious and the unconscious. The moment is pregnant with meaning; thus, the dreamer is "knocked up." As Levin relates the dream of the grad student's wife, we might consider how being knocked up relates to her position as both active dreamer and passive wife.

accepts their late-night intrusion. This facet of the dream may signal a customary deference to intellectual authority, as well as contribute to a sense that academics, with their abstruse theories, collude to criticize the logical flaws they perceive in everyday people's lives.

The story of this dream represents some of the discipline's main issues, namely how comparatists describe what they do and how they go about doing it. The story bears repeating not only for its revelatory allusions, but also for the power that the two "movers" wield, both literally and figuratively. While in charge of the discipline and its methods, the two literally move the field forward as well as decide what literature moves with and within the discipline. Responsible for training graduate students, they also move those students through the graduate program, deciding who will and will not move further in the field. As far as the dreamer is concerned, these two powerful men have arrived to disrupt the stability of her household, and she has no choice but to accept whatever decisions they make regarding how the literature is about to get compared. This acceptance, no doubt, is due at least in part to having observed how her husband responds to the academic climate in which he toils. In other words, she probably understood how important it was that her husband acquiesce to the intellectual demands that these men and their colleagues made of him. And she probably also understood that his future depended on how well he accommodated them.

This story also illuminates a number of institutional problems. For one, it presents comparison as physical labor and by association, men's work. Though women increasingly inform the discipline and the academy in general, the valence of intellectual

rigor as a masculine pursuit remains, and this story reminds us that a contemporary opportunity for a feminist challenge to the discipline as a workplace is still relevant. Two, the dream references a faulty apprenticeship model for graduate study where the passive student is supposed to learn by watching rather than by doing, thus returning the power of scholarship to the same authorities who would mete it out. A third interpretation, however, sheds light on the paradigmatic nature of comparative study. The husband and wife asleep upstairs, the workmen in coveralls descending from their truck, the genteel knocking at the door, all these images coalesce in a picture of domesticity that draws comparative study as a normative activity. The workmen's arrival, their impending job, the husband's simple explanation, all contribute to a sense of normalcy and good citizenship, combined with bourgeois consumerism and complacency. The husband does not consider the situation odd, nor do the men struggle to explain why they are there. Everything is accepted and acceptable.

This paradigm of normalcy masks the anxiety that probably instigated the dream. Instead of focusing on comparative literature's descriptive elements, the dream turns comfortingly toward the prescriptive; that is, it maps a logical path toward wish-fulfillment. The men will compare the literature and everything will be fine. But the dream's anxious prompt would suggest that things are far from fine. It is, in fact, difficult to determine comparative literature's object, let alone its method. Some scholars consider these difficulties to be the root of a disciplinary crisis, a subject to which we shall turn

momentarily.³ Add to this conundrum the discipline's evolutionary need to reflect current trends in literary scholarship and one discovers that the seeming normalcy of comparing the literature is more myth than fact.

This chapter explores the tension between a normalizing methodology wherein workers move (or more accurately, circulate) various literary elements according to a prescribed work plan, and a more anxiety-producing, more intimate process of examining how workers choose to work. Conceptually, minority identifies those anxiogenic sources that inform this process. Minority illuminates a multitude of impulses that resist textual or doctrinal authority. Minority also describes a variety of textual objects whose political affiliations defy singular forms, genres, or practices. In short, minority is the position from which hermeneutic agency develops. To exemplify minority's influence we need only to look to some casually dismissive applications of the term. In the case of the term "ethnic minority," the appellation often dismisses the real numbers involved in group proportions. The numbers of people counted in an ethnic minority may in fact make up a significant proportion or control a significant cultural aspect of a population. While providing an easy other for dominant ethnic groups (those who often see themselves as non-ethnic or not having a clearly differentiated ethnicity), ethnic minorities may

³ In his 1965 address to the ACLA, René Wellek continues his critique of comparative methodology that began in 1959 with "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," his address to the International Comparative Literature Association. In this later address, Wellek explains that an imbalance between "expansion and concentration, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, the study of literature as art and the study of literature in history and society" endangers the discipline's stability (336). He notes preceding commentary on the issue by Irving Babbitt, F.R. Leavis, and Etiemble, among others.

themselves find the term alienating because it does not account for the roles they play in society. Additionally, the term “sexual minority” awkwardly describes a group that may actually change fundamental beliefs about biological and sexual development, or, as in our current cultural moment, occasion reconsiderations of basic legal rights.⁴ While these terms are not as popular as they once were, having fallen out of fashion in a wave of political correctness, their existence outlines the complexity of majority/minority relations. In these and other cases, what is considered “less than” is in actuality an indication of social power, not a mark of marginality. It is in the continued suppression of this power that minority finds its method. As this chapter delves into the stakes of reading it will also work through some of the conditions for minority and analyze the roles those conditions play in developing a minor perspective. To begin to understand minority as it pertains to reading, however, let us first return to the problem of disciplinary method.

THE CRISIS OF COMPARISON

Comparative literature, the reflective practice of relating disparate literary objects, originated in 19th century Europe and developed alongside the various wars, imperial and colonial ventures, and economic shifts that contributed to the shape of the modern world. The practice of comparison linked literary production to national borders, and helped to demarcate national characters at the same time that it sought to analyze them. What was unique to one nation’s literature helped to distinguish it from its neighbors near and far,

⁴ At the time of this writing, the state of Minnesota is asking voters to consider a constitutional amendment that would bind citizens to the practice of prohibiting legal non-heterosexual marriage.

and early comparatists studied these unique traits in order to determine literary contiguities. Whether this practice is the discipline's primary goal remains up for debate, but comparative study has always fostered the connection between literary culture and national culture. This mode of study that aligned national literary qualities eventually became the academic discipline many continue to know it as today—the comparison of literatures from two or more countries or regions.

Taking hold in the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century, comparative literature grew into a discourse well poised to handle the big literary questions of form, content, production, reception, and circulation. Its disciplinary setting influenced the traditions with which it continues to be associated, and many scholars find their place within the discipline by challenging those traditions.⁵ Following trends in formalist and structuralist criticism, along with developing rigorous research programs, comparative literature uncovered new literary objects and read them through and with well-established, mostly European texts. The field continued to develop these methods, sticking closely to its roots, even as its critics questioned the validity of prevailing methodologies.

⁵ In their introduction to the anthology *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi explain that “[c]omparatists have often been leaders in the development and promulgation of literary theory, but theory itself needs to be freshly theorized in light of the far greater range of cultural difference it can now be asked to take into account” (x). The editors go on to note how comparatists challenge the shape and direction of the discipline, continually returning to the same questions of form and scope.

Accordingly, comparative literary study flourished in major academic centers in the U.S., those centers producing a wealth of new scholarship. In 1960, the ACLA began to oversee comparative study at the national level, with a governing structure meant to stimulate sustained interest in the field. As part of its operating procedures, the ACLA mandated a decennial report to note disciplinary gains and reinforce standards; consequently, the Levin (1965), Greene (1975), and Bernheimer (1993) reports illustrated the discipline's concerns and methods.⁶ Notably, as the century neared its end, the tenor of the reports successively changed from unabashedly conservative to cautiously liberal, in tune with developments in the humanities geared toward progress and social justice.

While those reports yielded a great quantity of information and generated many responses and critiques, they also highlighted common perspectives in the field.⁷ These perspectives, taken together, represent the field's defining criteria—its flexibility in terms of content, and its responsiveness to structural critique. These two factors alone regulate comparative study. Because the field is so dependent on its own scholarship, rather than that of allied fields (in single-language or national literary, cultural, or linguistic studies, for example), its constitutive dilemmas of what and how to study are influenced by other

⁶ All three reports were published in one volume, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, along with responses and other position papers.

⁷ Several of the reports' respondents note the roles that non-English language literatures play in comparison, but are less clear about the ways in which non-English-writing scholars participate in an English-focused discipline; that is, English is rarely treated as a foreign language in these estimations of the field. Neither do the reports and responses reflect student voices or collective concerns, while they emphasize the contributions students make to the field's development.

disciplines, but never quite understood or undertaken by them. Since the field depends on its own scholars to identify pertinent areas of study and to deliver competent analyses of those areas, its mission is to define its scope, a call that other disciplines may take for granted, as their objects may seem more clearly prescribed.⁸

In addition to the need to define its scope, comparative literature, like other humanities disciplines, was keen to explore the possibilities of multiculturalism, as campus cultural movements changed academic landscapes. The ACLA's response to growing multicultural concerns, expressed in the above-mentioned reports, became a key instrument in evaluating disciplinary connections between literary studies, progressive politics, and theoretical debates. In conjunction with departments loosely affiliated through rubrics of area studies, comparative literature strengthened its connections to the varieties of cultures represented on campus, in addition to its traditional emphasis on national cultures. While multicultural concerns regarding literature responded primarily to domestic cultural policies, comparative literature continued its affiliative trend by looking to more countries, cultures, and literatures, including those that did not have a campus foothold. The trend toward accumulating cultural knowledge via various national, regional, or ethnic arts generated debates regarding the very definition of a

⁸ In our interdisciplinary academic moment, it is certainly true that discrete disciplines are fostering greater and more strategic alliances in the service of their shared subject matter. Comparative literature, however, has always wrestled with the means of comparison, and, because of this, has often provided models for newer forms of interdisciplinarity.

suitable literary object, and the globally-oriented⁹ field could find no easy consensus regarding popular themes.

The discourse surrounding multiculturalism seemed to reflect two perspectives. One was that the field was responsible for including those literatures suppressed by conservative practices supporting a white, male, European vision of the academy. The other was that it also needed to focus on world literature and its relationship to a predominantly English-speaking academy. While the Levin report found no complications in considering the West as its natural site of inquiry, the Bernheimer report drew its inspiration from an observed truth: many scholars, even those at the time of the Levin report, were working on and with texts other than European. Furthermore, the report noted that a postcolonial view of literature heavily mitigated, if not outright prohibited Eurocentrism, and postcolonial studies was moving the field more firmly toward its global destination.

With this global outlook, the reports and their responses critically examined the field's objects and methods. Focusing on foreign¹⁰ languages, the field looked outward

⁹ *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, the 2004 ACLA volume succeeding *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, dispensed with the traditional ACLA report style, instead offering a series of papers oriented around the theme of globalization. The 1993 Bernheimer report is the last of the traditional reports. In 1993, the discipline was already beginning to turn from multiculturalism to globalization in a move that further highlighted both the changeability and surety of its disciplinary content.

¹⁰ In "Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship," Mary Louise Pratt rightly critiques comparative literature's use of the term "foreign" when she writes, "I wish to suggest in the strongest possible terms that comparatists take the lead in expunging the term *foreign* to refer to languages other than

from the English-speaking world, particularly from western Europe and the U.S. to the rest of the globe. In some senses, this external focus indicated a return to Goethe's postulation of a *Weltliteratur* able to contextualize various literary forms in relation to an albeit European set of standards.¹¹ In others, however, the project of world literature appeared to be a more straightforward colonial enterprise in which other cultures in other places seemed literary only by virtue of their association with such a paradigm. Comparative literature's willingness to engage with what it rendered foreign supports the field's historical role as academic ambassador; it operated throughout the 20th century as one of the foremost sites for national cultural acceptance and analysis. Comparative literature continues to be the place where many cultures meet on rigorous analytic terms, where the very concept of literature formalizes those cultures' interactions with one another.

This critical methodology that assembles the literary relationships between cultures, objects, or even methods parallels other political movements intent on shedding

English...Following the tradition of the MLA, let us agree on the term *modern languages* and put an end to another lexical legacy of the Cold War." However, even if the word were to be expunged from comparative literature, or replaced with another term, the orientation would remain. Languages other than English would still be treated as popular, but secondary at best.

¹¹ In "Conversations on World Literature," Goethe explains his idea of a *Weltliteratur* thus: "National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach. But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to some particular thing, and regard it as a model...if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented" (23).

light on and including lesser-known literary cultures. Its privileged status allowing it to find and celebrate diverse literatures, comparative literature was primed to play an important role in re-imagining global culture. Such a focus, however, helped to deem domesticity merely as a point from which global expansion could develop. From its home territory, comparative literature opened a window to the rest of the world, at the same time that it designed that world, presenting a biased view of the globe. Comparison, in this dual sense, was both a process of assessing the role of language in diverse literatures and a method for determining what counted as literature. This duality split the field's aims into two separate categories. The first aim, developing along global lines, saw world literature as a unifying discourse that could promote the academic visibility of new or underrepresented national cultures, while the other responded to multicultural developments and new interdisciplinary fields as it branched toward various area studies.

In comparative literature's interdisciplinary push toward cultural studies, it sought methodologies that would challenge the very notion of literature, widen the literary field, and highlight the discipline's theoretical ken.¹² The affinity between comparative literature and cultural studies, however, revealed conflicts in the comparative model. How, for example, could the field retain its literary specificity while actively pursuing objects outside its traditional domain? Which had a greater impact on the shape of the

¹² In "Must We Apologize?" Peter Brooks expresses his discomfort with a comparative literary trend that "creates the impression that the study of literature is an outmoded mandarin practice that had better catch up with the hip world of cultural studies" (99). Whether cultural studies is hip or not remains to be determined, but Brooks' point on the discipline's continued solvency is well-taken. It may be that cultural studies has gained more from comparative methodology than it has given to it.

field: its desire to recognize the great variety of world cultures through literature and semiotics, or its need to tackle the prickly underside of academic inequality in the humanities? Furthermore, with such a split agenda, how was a comparatist to understand her own place in the scheme of comparative discourse? And what should departments teach their undergraduates?

These questions persist as comparative literature departments compete for institutional resources at a time when liberal arts departments must defend their role in the production of career-ready graduates. Even in its earliest conceptions, comparative literature required a level of reflection that was inconsistent with the goals of technical or vocational training. Today, as critical thinking is often viewed more as a pedagogical shibboleth than a resume-building skill, departments struggle to promote literary instruction as an integral element of professionalization. Additionally, as universities take up the task of teaching fundamental reading and writing skills to increasing numbers of students, comparative literature finds itself doubly confronted by its research aims and its instructional responsibilities.

While the project undertaken here is not an attempt to valorize or privilege work being done in the field, it does recognize the unique circumstances and opportunities that accompany comparative research. Necessarily interdisciplinary, comparative literature occupies a space both contemplative and dynamic because of its commitment to the relationality of texts. In this flexible, contingent space, comparative literature can organize fluctuating ideas about the nature of literature. To that end, this project analyzes just one method for such organization. This project proposes that analyzing the function

and structure of minority can provide a better method for understanding comparative literary principles. The ideas represented here do not aim to promote comparative literature over other liberal arts or humanities disciplines, nor do they offer an easy resolution to what Wellek and others have called the crisis of comparative literature, that is, its developmental quandaries and confusion over disciplinary objects. This project, however, does seek to shift the discussion from questions of object suitability and departmental integrity to questions of scope and depth of engagement in comparative study. The research presented here stems from concerns about how to compare literatures from a perspective that does not take itself for granted. A critique of traditional comparative techniques reveals that comparing various literatures in an attempt to reveal cultural similarities is a laudable task, but it too often neglects the grounds on which comparison takes place.¹³ Similarly, situating the discourse on a list of interdisciplinary area studies models (such as media studies, ethnic or regional studies, gender studies, etc.), leaves out the crucial aspect of literature, the discipline's founding construct.

¹³ In "Comparing the Literature," Levin notes that "[t]he United States, although predominantly English-speaking, has been in a rather different position [than Great Britain or multilingual European countries]. Its colonial past, its continental isolation, its continuous series of emigrations, not to mention the restlessness of its writers contemplating the American scene, have conditioned it to look outward, eastward toward Europe" (80). Levin's key term here is "conditioned." Here, he briefly lays out the history of U.S. scholars' turn to Europe for comparison. Not a fully formed analysis of method, Levin nevertheless offers some insight into how comparatists go about finding their objects, and provides a critical point in his otherwise overly simplified explanation. Comparatists have to learn how and what to compare, and the centrifugal comparative process Levin outlines is not born of inertia, but of restlessness, a reassignment of agency in this diagram of gravitational force.

LITERATURE AND MINORITY

With multilingualism as comparative literature's calling card, the question of situation seemed to present itself at the same time that it slid under larger problems of scholarly labor. Mastering multiple languages, but working primarily in English, the average U.S. comparatist was compelled to comment on what she knew about non-English languages through literature. Less time was then available to consider how English was itself a discourse set in relation to others, and much scholarly content did not address the comparatist's view of comparison qua comparison. While many scholars work on the issue of situation by analyzing problems of marginalization through postcolonial, critical race, gender, sexuality, or queer theories, the presence of their voices within the hegemony of a discipline operating as a literary global-positioning system suggests a minority within a minority. These voices stand in stark contrast to what appears to be a coherent body of comparative scholarship, a body that is itself minoritized within general literary studies. The presence of this doubled minority also calls attention to the comparative plane on which it operates. This plane does not simply correspond to a major-minor axis, with degrees of separation between the two, although it may be useful to begin by considering how this axis cannot contain the entirety of the comparative plane.

Most think of minority as a function of majority; that is, they believe that majority conditions the possibility for a minority. A fundamental understanding of minority's role in producing balance and stability remains, however, at the root of national and cultural

relations. We might here recall the creation of the League of Nations, where minor countries, regions, and ethnic groups set the standard for national and international political relations.¹⁴ While these political stipulations helped to render minority as the vulnerable, tolerable entity many perceive it as today, minority groups continue to hold real power that can upset the tenuous balance between peace and chaos. Returning to the image of an axis, we see how the degrees of separation between major and minor dissolve under scrutiny, and the axis itself seems to curve toward a concept of minority that organizes differences. In this realm, majority might be considered minority's object, but the shifting of one pole toward the other unsettles the axis and redefines the plane. While minority operates on the periphery of a center/margin paradigm, it is also the space from which one measures distance in terms of public life, ethnic heritage, or national boundary. Minority is the place from which otherness emerges, and is thus the foundation of difference. At the same time, minority differentiates, so it is both the place from which otherness emerges, and the place to which it returns.

Within comparative literature, minority functions both to legitimate new avenues of exploration into the Foucauldian human sciences, and to signal the contested space from which such avenues emerge. The comparative plane thus described is not a simple

¹⁴ J. Paul Martin claims that “[i]n the peace negotiations after the first war through the Treaties of Paris and the founding of the League of Nations, the great powers paid special attention to Europe’s ethnic minorities, whose problems were seen as a past and likely future cause of war” (129). He also explains how the League’s Minorities Committee was ineffective in helping minorities assimilate into their respective dominant national cultures, further acknowledging the role of minorities in shaping political organizations such as the United Nations.

continuum in which majority occupies the greater space and minority the lesser. Such configurations are the focal point for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who describe a minor literature that emerges from within the major. Their rhizomic structure, however, depends too heavily on notions of majority for its development.¹⁵ It also suggests that the minor is always becoming, never arrived, an emerging strategy that cools minor intensity and progress. The project envisioned here reconsiders minority as a function of critical tendency, not solely as a resistant strategy or as an improvement of dominant methodology.

An example may clarify things. As comparative literature collected its global objects and looked to English as its comparative medium, it unfurled a linguistic distancing project that obscured the relationship between English and its own constitutive bases. Rey Chow's response to the Bernheimer report, for example, admitted that it might be beneficial for students to work solely on linguistic variations in English (regional, dialectal, gendered, etc.), but it also expressed doubt that such a trend would gather much support, adding evidence for English as the unquestionably native linguistic source (114). Studying such variations, furthermore, would not actually address the problem of English as a native tongue because it would only establish a range of linguistic permutations

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari write that "minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature," (18) and we can see that their own hearts, metaphorically speaking, are in the right place. The idea of minority as rupture, as the point at which majority breaks down or open, is fruitful, but this idea would require a coherent majority that could withstand such continual rupture.

rather than an analysis of English as non-native.¹⁶ English itself, however, is neither problem nor solution for an outward-facing discipline looking to a global future while uncertain about its home territory. More prescient is the role English occupies as interlocutor. It offers comparatists the chance to consider what is truly given¹⁷ in its orientation toward the world; that is, English opens a space from which to critique the formation of center/margin or major/minor literatures because of its unquestioned dominance. Critical to comparative literature's English bias as part of its multicultural impetus is its emphasis on minority's quiet task of conditioning majority, a goal

¹⁶ Rey Chow's point is well-taken, but it is also important to understand the difference between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech) as Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out. *Langue* "is not a function of the speaker. It is the product passively registered by the individual." *Parole* "on the contrary, is an individual act of the will and the intelligence, in which one must distinguish: (1) the combinations through which the speaker uses the code provided by the language in order to express his own thought, and (2) the psycho-physical mechanism which enables him to externalise [sic] these combinations" (14). Dividing English into several languages only points to the variety of speech combinations possible in it.

¹⁷ In "Emergent Literature and Comparative Literature," Wlad Godzich argues that, "[t]o begin with, the theoretical impulse originated in an operation of demystification: it sought to bring back to light the constructed and institutionally determined character of the objects of literary study, something that the institution of literature, like all the other institutions within the apparatus of knowledge, prefers to gloss over, though, in all fairness, without denying its factuality. Institutionalized knowledge practices—another name for disciplines—have rules and protocols for the determination of their objects; once some entity is constituted as such an object, its constructed character is left out of consideration, and it functions for all practical purposes as a given" (24). English, as a constructed object, can affirm the factuality that Godzich speaks of here.

represented by commitments to both multiculturalism and globalization. A further illustration with characterize this task.

In 1979, Robert Stepto optimistically reported that if, as his colleagues maintained, techniques used to teach Afro-American literature were equally as useful for all literature, then the time when “the committed Afro-Americanist can paraphrase Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and say with great truth to colleagues in other literatures, ‘Who knows but that I speak for you?’” was certainly near (6). In order to reconstruct Afro-American literary pedagogy, Stepto promoted a move from approaching literature as a multi-purpose “occult potpourri” to a critical appreciation of literary value (9). The hope that Stepto articulates encapsulates an important aspect of minor literary politics. Stepto’s comments suggest that minority can condition all kinds of literature; his comments show that by looking at specific native literary conditions, the conditions for the larger status of literature can be determined.

Stepto and others revisited the pedagogical conditions of Afro-American literature during a joint MLA/NEH summer seminar and sought to secure Afro-American literature’s rightful place in literature departments. They made their goals for a new production of literary discourse quite clear. This task, they asserted, similar to the Levin report’s assertion that comparative literature needed to tighten up its standards, was to reset Afro-American literature’s fundamental questions and goals. Importantly, Stepto and his colleagues saw Afro-American literature’s mission discursively based within English-language literature’s politics and productive economics. In that sense, it seemed to operate like Deleuze and Guattari’s minor literature. Within the greater context of

English-language literature, it could comment on the inner workings of this major literature even as it supported the conditions for Afro-American literature's minority. In fact, as the seminar participants reconsidered the relationship between criticism and literary scholarship, they summarized some deleterious curricular effects that were due to instructors' deviations from formal methods. The seminar scholars wanted to get away from the kinds of intentional fallacies, narrative misconfigurations, historiographical mistakes, and general misinformation that tended to accompany Afro-American literary instruction. They wanted to reintroduce the kinds of ethical considerations that the curriculum had initially supported, including issues surrounding canonization, literary movements and periods, style and function, and categories of difference. In the process of their reconstruction, the seminar participants worked comparatively to modify course designs, planning a reconnection between theory and literature. Minority, as this example presents it, calibrates the context in which it exists. It acts as an attunement of general literary principles. This is a key function of minority, but it is not its final function.

As the scholars retooled course designs and recorded new close readings of classic texts, they also remarked on literature's ability to remind scholars of the critical politics involved in any kind of re-reading. In the process of re-establishing the links between theories and practices of reading and teaching, they energized the theories with which they were working. No longer depoliticized or seen as indicators of a politics-to-come, no longer a far-flung outpost of elite academia, theory regained its role as a systematic challenge to the quotidian machinations that endorsed a center/margin paradigm. Indeed, by working in this manner, the group implicitly saw itself making

mainstream strides in literary study that were not simply about recharging Afro-American literary instruction. These strides were a necessary part of literary studies writ large. They did not simply condition the major, but were key aspects of reading deliberately, critically, from a place called home. They therefore determined that minority was always already literary. Through their systematic understanding of centrist politics, they saw a connection between depoliticized theoretical applications and passive instruction.

READING FOR THE MINOR

As the interpretive trajectories described above reinforce, comparatists can improve their pedagogical environments if they critique their own foundations in the process of manipulating the global cultural, social, or ideological literary methods from which they learn so much. This project, a minor intervention in disciplinary discourse both in a traditional and critical sense, strategically responds to methodological questions. In the form of a reading program that analyzes the ways in which minority is both category and political tendency,¹⁸ the strategy of reading for the minor treats the methodological problems previously noted as reading problems. Similar to those grade school word problems in arithmetic, reading for the minor requires comparatists to understand a variety of relations (syntactical, causal, summative, cultural) in a hierarchy

¹⁸ In “The Author as Producer,” Walter Benjamin describes the connection between a correct literary tendency and a correct political tendency, explaining how technique influences reception. He remarks that “[r]ather than ask, ‘What is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time?’ I should like to ask, ‘What is its *position* in them?’” (222). We might think of minority as a political tendency of the sort he discusses.

of practices (first, second, third-order operations, etc.). Connecting, sorting, and situating elements of the reading process through a minor understanding adds a political corrective to comparative literature as a site for research and practice, while it builds on longstanding formalist concerns regarding systemization.

This program deals with the problem of situation by returning the comparatist to her site of study. Rather than simply juxtaposing one culture to another, or trying to assign literariness to a wider range of cultural objects, reading for the minor takes as its starting point the fact that reading is itself a process of negotiation bidden by the mutual recognition of text and reader. Reading, on these terms, takes place through political positioning, cultural competency, and a productive capability generated by the variety of minor impulses that demand acknowledgement. These terms require unpacking, and this project presents three case studies that open to a minor reading, one that demands more from the reader than a facile acceptance of her role as cultural interpreter or literary regulator. The case studies offered here include the works of three contemporary U.S. authors—Paul Beatty, Erika Lopez, and Beau Sia—all of whom belong to established ethnic minorities in the U.S. (African American, Puerto Rican American, and Chinese American, respectively), but who also signify more diversity than those simple categories offer. Their work, grounded in techniques of satire, exposes the limitations of representation at the same time that it comments on the necessity of representational politics. Satire gives these three authors a formal mode of criticism, but they expand the genre with multi-platform texts that combine drama, prose, and performance in novel

ways. These authors have all expressed their frustrations with categorization, and their subject matter reflects a struggle to maintain accurate political orientations.

Critics Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih reflect on their own political orientations when they explain their academic connections. They write,

[had] we not met through an arbitrary gathering in a major metropolis, the seat of power, our minor orientations would have remained invisible to each other. We realized, in retrospect, that our battles are always framed vertically, and we forget to look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent. (1)

This connection, made possible through a commonality (English, in this case) sheds light on an untapped potential hidden in normalized relations. The two meet at a conference in a country different from both their workplaces and their homelands. They realize that they fight the same battles, so to speak, in terms of recognition at their home universities, and they wonder why they have remained isolated in their cultural area studies instead of banding together. They discover that their transnational foci route them toward each other instead of away from one another, and they theorize that their transnational minority is a strength that is covered up in rubrics of ethnic studies. Their chance meeting offers them an opportunity to think about how configurations of dominance structure their work, and they ultimately acknowledge that the conference, a supposed power center, is not actually the center of their research. The now decentered conference bolsters their mutual appreciation for other ways of moving academically. Minority operates in this fashion, through sideways looks at networks not readily apparent. Beatty, Lopez, and Sia form such a network, and through reading their work one finds not just a perfunctory

similarity, but a minor mode of belonging. In this network, comparatists find that reading is a place in which the possibilities inherent in minor comparisons reside.

MINOR COMPARISONS

In *Calibrations: Reading for the Social*, Ato Quayson relates Frantz Fanon's claim that "[t]he Negro is comparison. There is the first truth. He is comparison: that is, he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and the ego-ideal." Quayson goes on to explain that such comparison, as Fanon describes it, consists of three elements: the white culture in which the colonized subject navigates agency, the black culture of that subject's peers, and the paradigm of whiteness that governs all of the relationships (xiii). Here comparison functions as a system within a system measured against another system. Fanon gets to the heart of the matter. This minor subjectivity is not an automatic result of colonial otherness; it is a response to the conditions of othering, an active situation within a passively oppressive system. Through this multi-tiered process of calibration, comparison works to reinforce the synchronicity often denied when two disparate objects are juxtaposed, so that any of the three elements' development is dependent upon and happens at the same time as the others.¹⁹ There is, therefore, no way to compare the

¹⁹ Notable here is a distinct denial of other races' subjectivities. Johannes Fabian, in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, explains how object formation in anthropology can employ "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse" (31). This denial of what Fabian calls coevalness corresponds with comparative literature's tendency to compare without marking the space of comparison, without

historic differences between the elements without negotiating the elements themselves. Comparison, in Quayson's reading of Fanon, works as a discursive mode rather than a literary-historical trajectory. Furthermore, it derives from a critical awareness of difference, one in which colonized Antillean people react to and resist colonial forms of socialization, in this case.

Relating comparative literature's comfortable, elite position in the U.S. academy to this particular postcolonial model, however, does engender some pertinent reservations. The temptation to read Stepto's wish (that Afro-American literature be a model for all literature) as a desire to instrumentalize minority falls in line with outmoded ideas about multiculturalism, where the variety of cultures available only serve to instruct a dominant culture. This kind of instrumentalization reduces minority, in this case, Afro-American literary pedagogy, to just another tool available to dominant scholarship, a tool without cultural specificity, history, or political mandate. The call for academic redesign that Stepto and his colleagues sent out was not to depoliticize Afro-American literature, but to declare its politics within an academic framework, to give it the scholarly respect it deserved, particularly as compared to other, namely Anglo-American literatures.

Similarly, but perhaps with an even more forceful political mandate, looking to Fanon's Caribbean for comparison requires additional consideration. The social and political disparities between privileged U.S. scholarship and anti-colonial Caribbean political theory will not dissolve under comparison's benevolent gaze. The political

acknowledging mutual terms of comparison that would reveal the compared texts' *Gleichzeitigkeit*, the same-timeliness that occurs when texts are equal and equally presented.

context of French departmentalization in Martinique, filtered through Fanon's experience in war-torn Algeria and articulated through his own idiosyncratic voice, is not replicable. Using his experience simply as a learning tool is demeaning and unethical. The Negro Fanon describes, for example, is not the same as the Afro-American literature instructor who ethically builds his classroom, nor is he an elite comparatist working from the comforts of academic stability. Moreover, the Caribbean situation that Fanon decries is just that; it does not directly apply to the U.S. or to comparative literature as a method of critical inquiry. It does point, however, to deeper connections between space, place, and subjectivity, connections revealed through reading. As Lionnet and Shih discovered when meeting, there exist lateral networks that seem invisible when looking for a center that purports to connect all subjectivity. When Edward Kamau Brathwaite declared that "[t]he unity is submarine" (1975), he mapped routinely disavowed points of contact between Caribbean islands, Africa, and colonial Antillean subjectivity. A crucial addition to these points of contact includes the southern U.S. Usually overlooked, the historical relationship between the U.S. and the Caribbean is one of mutual dependence. Historically speaking, the U.S. depended heavily on the Caribbean for much of its economic, cultural, and political success. Indeed, Haiti's 1804 revolution greatly contributed to a then nascent appreciation of slave subjectivity in the U.S., as well as Hegel's own ideas about the nature of historical discourse.²⁰ We might therefore consider

²⁰ Susan Buck-Morss describes Haiti's relationship to Hegel's dialectic in Part One of *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, recalling his role as a Freemason in the effective silencing of a crucial link between Haiti and Western philosophy.

our own country as part of Brathwaite's submarine unity. A minor comparative methodology helps to bear this relationship out.

From this Caribbean example we return to the Levin and Greene ACLA committees and their belief that comparative methodologies work well when trained on coterminous regions, cultures, ideologies, and languages. A minor interpretation finds that the term coterminous needs the same rigorous scrutiny that Levin and Greene thought of for a European comparative literature. Attuned to the same social forces that included comparative literature's development, reading for the minor shows how investigating the similarities between languages with common ancestors and cultures can reveal developments within languages that are equally important. The practice of minor comparison takes this notion of internal development as one of its starting points. Rather than focus on the external, rather than rely on an oriental perspective to secure its own subjective space, minor comparison calibrates the relationship between an outward-looking discipline and its own interpretive dimensions.

CHAPTER 2: PAUL BEATTY, MYTH, AND RESISTANCE

Paul Beatty's first book of poetry, *Big Bank Take Little Bank* (1991), was published as a prize for winning the first Nuyorican Poets Café Grand Slam (Shavers and Beatty 68). Notable for its turn from spoken to written word, Beatty's volume helped to solidify slam poetry as literary, that is, as publishable, and to challenge firmly held notions of what poetic language was or should be. Dubbed a hip-hop writer by critics, Beatty's work is often characterized as belonging to the ambiguously defined hip-hop generation of young, primarily black artists, musicians, and writers. This designation, while providing a communal and convenient label for young thinkers working in urban centers, continues to be controversial, since it also implies a distance between itself and other contemporaneous, namely sophisticated, bodies of work. As hip-hop music is often criticized for lacking the intricacies of older forms of rhythm and blues, jazz, or classical music, so too have hip-hop writers been thought to represent only the angst-ridden emotions felt by oppressed and slighted youth. Some critics claim that writers of this so-called generation, like their musical comrades, do not exemplify the kinds of rigorous training associated with long-held literary tradition, and that they utilize language inappropriate for serious literary study or acceptance.

Beatty's work, now including two volumes of poetry and three novels, challenges its hip-hop label. While making many references to hip-hop music and culture, and featuring characters whose lives are bound up in the politics of urban youth, race, and aesthetics, his work cannot be seen solely to represent those issues, or even to offer a fresh look into the harsh reality of black city life. While the work certainly fits into an

African American literary tradition, and often blatantly cites and comments on earlier entries in the canon, it pushes at the limits of what can be termed African American experience and self-reflexively contemplates how such racial and literary categories serve to marginalize literary experience for both readers and writers. Specifically, Beatty's exploration of myth in the form of canonic tropes and stereotypic figures, symbols, and tales exposes the minor relationship between literary history and literary experience. In this sense, literary experience accounts for the myriad ways readers approach texts that are either touted to present commodified difference or to illustrate particular social realities. Beatty uses mythic tropes and figures to satirize the disturbing practice of substituting myth for the reality of both literary and African American experience. By using these tropes and figures this way, Beatty provides a minor reading of African American literary history. In his work, he critiques the means by which myth produces some of the damaging social forces that govern literary history. In doing so, he interrogates the structural limits of mythological representation in order to promote a richer understanding of myth's potential, while resisting its easy and misleading packaging.

Born in 1962 in Los Angeles and educated in Boston and New York, Beatty explains that his interest in psychology turned to an enjoyment of writing. Instead of finishing his Ph.D. at Boston University, he enrolled in an M.F.A. program at Brooklyn College, where he studied with, among other faculty, Allen Ginsberg (Beatty, et al. 1999; Shavers and Beatty 67). Concerned with using language in both new and familiar ways, Beatty began performing his poetry at the Nuyorican Poets Café, and went on to tour with

Café poets in the early 90s, when slam poetry was gaining influence and popularity. His relationship with the slam movement, however, began to dissolve not long after the publication of his first book. By the time he published *Joker, Joker, Deuce* (1994), his second book of poetry, he was criticizing the Nuyorican project, which was now producing spoken word records, as well as inspiring a national poetry movement in bars, coffeehouses, and on college campuses (Haye and Beatty 23).

Turning after his second book from poetry to fiction, Beatty's first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), continued his linguistic experimentations. Built from an earlier autobiographical essay, the novel explored, among other things, the relationships between poetry, celebrity, race, and inner city culture (Beatty, et al. 1999). In his second novel *Tuff* (2000), Beatty continued these explorations, but substituted avant-garde cinema for poetry and added local politics. In his most recent novel *Slumberland* (2008), he expands his ideas about culture, art, and politics by taking the plot overseas to a Berlin still struggling with reunification. He deals most explicitly with hip-hop music in this novel, designing his main character as a DJ.

Positive reviews of Beatty's work often link it to those literary trends inaugurated by canonized authors such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, along with Black Arts Movement figures such as Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni. This link usually frames an image of Beatty as a young version of any of these writers. Though this link makes chronological sense (with perhaps too great of a time gap), and while his work certainly deals with some of the same issues these elder writers address, Beatty often takes issue with many of the important characteristics of the African American canon.

This disagreement might provide a true location for his hip-hop sensibilities. Claiming a suspicion of civil rights era harmony among progressives,²¹ Beatty's rejection of idealized communal life and his distrust of hero-martyrs adds a hard-to-classify critical dimension to his work. Yes, his main characters are young black men trying to find their voices in an increasingly hostile world, but to see Beatty's work as reducible to a chronological link in an unbroken literary chain is to miss the critique and challenge it offers to literary history in general, and African American literary history in particular.

Additionally, the language that Beatty employs helps to problematize his works' sole placement in an African American literary trajectory. Described alternately as "highly erudite, superstylized, and humorously bleak" (Shavers and Beatty 67) and "a kind of literary-parodic counterpart to hip-hop and stand-up comedy" (Bernstein), Beatty's use of language seems to skirt both the limitations and comforts of the popular imagination in regard to contemporary African American literature. While the nuances between the above-cited reviews may seem slight, they point to a wide gap in literary perceptions about the quality of Beatty's work. Both reviews reference Beatty's first novel and both praise its ingenuity. But Shavers notes how the text clinches the loyalty of Beatty's growing network of fans, while Bernstein sees it as a superficial reenactment of work by popular but edgy performers such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy, two

²¹ In *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip Hop Generation*, Daniel Grassian argues that one of the hallmarks of hip-hop literature is its rebellion against the civil rights era ideology that promotes racial uplift by valorizing hegemonic norms. Grassian claims that this suspicion, or even outright disdain, is evidenced by what may be best described as street logic, a healthy distrust of authority and idealistic morality.

artists who usually go uncounted as part of the literary canon. Both reviewers admire the text's linguistic innovation, but for different reasons and to different ends. Shavers praises Beatty's poetic prose, while Bernstein sees it as clever, but not literary, or not literary enough. In this comparison, Bernstein looks to a long comedic tradition of satirists and performers, and suggests that Beatty's work might be more "transgressive joking" than literature in its more accepted sense.²² Shavers, on the other hand, sees the new work as carving a literary path into previously uncharted territory, an increasingly important goal for writers of African American literature, he argues.

How does this contentious reception of Beatty's work reflect the character of its content? One element we might first consider is his subject matter, since its very nature is what marks the work as African American, in tandem with Beatty's own ethnic identification. It may be useful here to signify just what it is, beyond the ethnographic descriptors his fictional characters embrace, that supports and distorts a limiting African American label. A minor interpretation is called for here. From the reader's perspective, characters such as Gunnar Kaufman, Winston "Tuffy" Foshay, and Ferguson Sowell (also known as DJ Darky) manipulate stereotypes to test their flexibility and endurance, not simply as a form of play, but as a way to reason their own existences. Their textual portrayal alerts the reader to this deeper form of discourse, where expectations and experience clash in an inventive narrative. So a character like Gunnar, "the number-one son of a spineless colorstruck son of a bitch who was the third son of an ass-kissing

²² Bernstein goes on in his review to explain that *The White Boy Shuffle* is best seen as sociological critique, as a kind of "nihilistic slapstick" that cannot carry the weight of the magical realism it attempts to utilize.

sellout house Negro who was indeed a seventh son” (*The White Boy Shuffle* 5), traces his lineage through a combination of Hollywood blackface, minstrel showmanship, race treachery, and Anglo-Saxon or Latin American oral history. Even his name offers a view into his complicated racial heritage, as it is both Scandinavian and Jewish.²³ These intricacies overlap and are further exacerbated by Gunnar’s own quirky sense of identity as a kid who moves from a progressive white neighborhood to an inner city populated by blacks and Latinos holding firmly to conservative values while unsuccessfully battling oppression. This and other of his characters’ complicated heritages showcase the potential often hidden in representations of black subjectivity in general, and African American literature in particular. Because being American is often considered a hyphenated subjectivity for people of color (and ultimately everyone, even Anglo-Americans), it is necessary to read that hyphen as a gap between ethnicities, nations, and heritages. The hyphen stresses an impossible unity, one that the resulting term can only reinforce. Beatty puts pressure on that hyphen; while it seems to promote ethnic diversity and racial inclusion, it tends to reify a two-party racial system. The African American misnomer is even more problematic as it rarely refers to people with a clearly traceable African heritage. By imbuing his characters with multiple, even historically unlikely, characteristics and complications,²⁴ Beatty critiques an essentialist notion of racial purity

²³Beatty describes his admiration for Beat poet Bob Kaufman, who reputedly was of German Jewish and Martinican descent, in his essay “Black Humor,” and Gunnar may be named after him, although Beatty has never claimed this to be the case.

²⁴ Grassian claims that very few slave owners in the U.S. were of Jewish descent, and therefore, most slaves did not have Jewish surnames. So Gunnar’s name, while fantastic, is statistically unlikely (95-6).

or authenticity. That Gunnar does not face existential crises because of his lineage proves that his dynamism is due less to the burdens of black history than the future of black experience.

Beatty's other characters benefit from equally contested identities. Tuffy feels alienated by his Black Panther father and turns to a young black rabbi and a Japanese Latina activist for guidance. DJ Darky explains how his highly marketable intellect was quickly diverted from science and engineering to music because his blackness was unacceptable to industry recruiters. Darky's musical talent takes him on a journey to Germany, where he learns to deconstruct his ideas about blackness and whiteness in order to make socially meaningful art. These characters disavow any idealized essentialism, and, through their complexities, present more viable attitudes about racialization. Canonical African American literature, however, maintains its categorical cohesion by essentialist methods, using specific racial tropes as necessary symbols of African American experience. The canon continues to legitimate symbols of pride under adversity, or purity within violation as virtuous signs of its sobriety, solemnity, and cultural rigor. This kind of legitimation finds an outlet in other forms of ethnic categorization, and adversely affects authors who routinely attempt new or experimental work, but are returned to the ghetto of identity politics by their critics.²⁵ Hence, Beatty's

²⁵ A prime example of such a return is found on the 1991 paperback cover of Sara Suleri's masterful 1989 novel *Meatless Days*. On this cover, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. blurbs "Suleri is a postcolonial Proust to Rushdie's phantasmagorical Pynchon." Surely intended as an endorsement, Gates' statement nevertheless reads as a backhanded compliment that accepts Suleri's work only as a nod to a male French novelist. Gates doubles the slight by comparing her work to that of a male Indian novelist, suggesting that readers

characterization as a hip-hop writer becomes a way to dismiss his work as simply beholden to an outmoded and overdone racial narrative.

The minority status of Beatty's work is exemplified by its self-reflexive gesture that continually pokes at traditional notions of race formation. Self-reflexivity, in this case, indicates the work's tendency toward self-affirmation in the face of a literary desire to minimize effects.²⁶ Race, in Beatty's work, is as much an economic mode as it is a subjective one. As an economic mode, race exists as an imbalance of narrative subjectivity and history and operates as an element of narrative circulation, providing a mechanism for literary identification as it recalls the canon. Beatty's narratives circulate key questions and problems in racial discourse, introducing them to the reader in novel, satiric ways. Summoning and discharging racial discourse within the limitations of satire, Beatty's work shows how a racial economy in which subjectivity is allocated by checking off items on a narrative list can only make fun of itself. Making fun of this racial

should be familiar with his work in order to read hers. The accumulation of these comparisons, even under the best circumstances (e.g. if one has a firm belief that Proust is a better writer than Pynchon), can only reduce the text to a shadow of literary greatness.

²⁶ In his article "Conjectures on World Literature," Franco Moretti explains that comparative literature's move toward world literature has been falsely predicated on the idea that the two literatures are essentially the same thing, with world literature just including more work. This postulation alludes to two beliefs: one, that comparative and world literature are necessarily in the same plane and can therefore be compared in this manner, and two, that world literature is a known entity just waiting for comparative literature to flatter its contours. These beliefs signify a desire to define, conquer, and control world literature through an oriental paradigm that others world literature at the same time that it makes it available for use. Self-affirmation denies this institutional desire.

economy is tricky, however, because his work depends on readers' familiarity with certain racial tropes and holds those tropes as valid narrative material. With this kind of satire comes a vulnerability. Too much winking at the audience and it changes from satire to onanistic preoccupation; not enough self-awareness and it could be mistaken for race-baited social commentary.

Because Beatty's characters have a marked racial identity that, for the most part, does not lend itself to stereotyped or easily recognizable raced subjects, they lay the difficulties of race bare. In his poem "At Ease," Beatty's narrator expresses some of the complications surrounding racial identification and commodification. Beatty writes,

i admit there's an urge/to merge ginsbergs/ice age incantations/with some spitfire
 monk vibes/but no tai chi for me "g"/nix on the tye dye/wont hindu my blues
 nor/tofu my soulfood/im gonna be/the bulimic bohemian/eatin up my people/then
 purgin their regurgitated words/on the page/and the poems/become self
 made/little icarus birds/immaculately hatched/from the multicultural nest eggs/of
 the east village and west l.a. (*Joker, Joker, Deuce* 2-3)

and describes the temptations of gluttonous multicultural consumption. Later in the poem, however, the narrator explains that the little icarus birds look nice, but wonders if they can fly (3). The situation presented here is of an urban black youth who, as a shrewd consumer, has a variety of cultural tropes and behaviors from which he can choose. Yearning for a more authentic experience, however, he knows that he will find no other way to literary enlightenment than through an examination of his own contingent circumstances. Multiculturalism is presented to him as a marketplace of equal options,

but he understands that to dabble in otherness is to misappropriate cultural struggles in the name of cosmopolitan sophistication. Rather than gorge on and then purge the truisms of a canon that substitutes a myth of cultural competency for actual cultural experience, the narrator imagines a landscape of militarized factions and his necessary negotiation of volatile cultural zones.

With these lines, we also see that myth functions as an experiential symbol as well as a structure for narrative resistance. The narrator knows how he is supposed to perceive urban life because he has read the books and heard the stories that described that life for him. His journey, however, reveals a disconnect between his literary awareness and his education. Myth, as represented through the symbol of Icarus, links this current text to a literary past without succumbing to the same canonic determination. Icarus' hubris, his belief that he could change his nature by adopting attributes not inherent to his race, is mitigated through the narrator's understanding. When the narrator says that the birds are "born to sing lyric segues/while caged/whats the latin/scientific/slave name/for pretty peacocks/whose feathers span the flesh spectrum/but are stuck on with wax/it looks nice/but can it fly," (3) he exposes how African American literary celebrity or quasi-poetic derivations often overshadow more necessary, more productive, more minor approaches to lived reality. Too cliché to stomach, the poems generated from this representational conflict unveil the narrator's shameful appetite for recognition while they shamelessly flaunt their feeble authenticity. Myth ultimately provides an entrance point for this conflict, and by reinterpreting the mythic symbol, an alternate, though still entangled resolution unfolds.

Reading this poem closely yields some data vital for seeing a set of themes that traverse all of Beatty's work. The narrator, seeing himself as a soldier ironically "at ease," navigates a city full of race traps and cultural catch-22s. He winds up armoring himself so that he can readily pass undetected through an enemy territory that would reduce him to just another urban youth, a waiting crime statistic, or an embodiment of cultural depravation. When the narrator is "lookin good like you should" at the end of the poem, he implicates the reader through this slickster refrain. This final line of the poem turns the narrative from the narrator's perspective to the reader's. Through a minor perspective, the reader sees how creating and maintaining an authentic literary historical reality runs counter to a traditional authoritative one. The poem's final stanza, like a military cadence, needs both a listener and a speaker to work effectively. Implicating the reader through call and response techniques plays an important thematic role in Beatty's work, and it helps to reinforce his take on minority politics, in which all of his characters play crucial, minor parts. Minority, as a political literary method, helps to explain Beatty's examination of myth. In his work, myth provides a structure for resistance, as well as acts as a signifier for a wished-for past. Within myth, as within hyphenated nationalities, there are structural gaps that give under pressure, opening up potential work sites. Because Beatty's narrators strike poses of ease when they are, in fact, deeply troubled by their feelings of isolation and alienation, they participate in a signifying system that beckons as well as denies them. Whether it is a superficial embodiment of blackness, performance anxiety, or a fear of commodification (or worse, a fear of desiring

that commodification), the mythological structures behind these problems help to shape them into unavoidable forces.

THE FORCE OF MYTH

In his semiological text *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes delivers an analytically useful description of mythological structure. Myth, for Barthes, is a form of communication, a type of speech, a historical mode; therefore, mythic objects are transitional messages rather than materials (109-10). Barthes concerns himself with the structure and force of myth, insofar as it lends itself, through study, to both semiology and ideology. Mythic objects, as Barthes understands them, cannot operate as total ideas in themselves. They can only be read through a system that shapes them. Barthes explains that

[m]ythological speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. (110)

With this explanation, Barthes recognizes myth as belonging to a sign system that accounts for the exchange of value that is subsequently recorded as meaning. Key to his explanation is the notion that mythical speech, understood as any mythical subject represented as such, is a product of a sociolinguistic process already at work; that is, its material is never new, only re-worked into a new message. What this means, then, is that myth reifies signification rather than instigates it. Myth works on two levels; on the first,

it identifies a communication system (of language, of images, of stories) already in place, and manipulates it for its own ends. On the second, it lends itself to the recreation of other forms of communication via its structural manipulation. This dialectical process gives myth its totalizing function. For Barthes, myth becomes metalanguage because it takes the Saussurian process of signification (sign=signifier/signified) as the basis for its own proliferation and “[e]verything happens as if myth shifted the formal system of first signification sideways” (115). Myth takes the final product of signification, the gap between signifier and signified wherein meaning is born, and uses it as the material with which to start a new meta-process.

Keeping this idea of myth in mind, turning to explicit examples of myth in action will illustrate the sociohistorical force it exerts. Stepto finds three underlying assumptions in his study of Afro-American narrative, and he describes them thus:

The first [underlying assumption] is that Afro-American culture, like all cultures, has its store of what Northrup Frye has called “canonical stories” or what I call “pregeneric myths”—shared stories or myths that not only exist prior to literary form, but eventually shape the forms that comprise a given culture’s literary canon. The primary pregeneric myth for Afro-America is the quest for freedom and literacy. The second is that once the pregeneric myth is set in motion in search of its literary forms, the historian of Afro-American literature must attempt to define and discuss how the myth both assumes and does not assume the properties of genre—notably, in this context, the properties of autobiography, fiction, and to a lesser degree, historiography. The final assumption is that if an

Afro-American literary tradition exists, it does so not because there is a sizeable chronology of authors and texts, but because those authors and texts collectively seek their own literary forms—their own admixtures of genre—bound historically and linguistically to a shared pregeneric myth. (xv-xvi)

Stepo's configuration of pregeneric myths aligns with Barthes' idea of myth as a semiological system because it emphasizes its structural nature rather than its historical productions. These three narrative ideas: Afro-America's mythic quest for freedom and literacy; the historian's subsequent attempt to define, via this mythic quest, what qualifies as generic; and Afro-American literature's authors' collective search for their own literary forms, those forms themselves bound to a pregeneric myth, come to form the basis for work in the African American literary canon. Moreover, various attempts to make African American literature assume the properties of historiography stress the importance of Beatty's canonical critique. Stepto's assertion that genre is a key concern for literary historians only illustrates how discussions about African American literature can get bogged down by genre debates. Historiography and history respectively show the difference between form and content, where the understanding of one inflects the practice of the other. Concerned with form, Beatty uses satire to evaluate how narrative can blur the distinction between history and historiography, causing them to overlap in African American literature. With an ear for stories told as myths, he directs his narratives toward an open potentiality rather than a repeated trope.

Jeffrey B. Leak, also interested in the relationship between myth and literature, analyzes how race and gender work through myth in old and new texts in the African

American canon, focusing his critique on sociological concerns as they play out in literature. He identifies a handful of traits that circulate in both the literary and sociological discourses about black men. Some of the stereotypic traits he identifies—intellectual inferiority, sexual prowess, criminality, and cultural depravation—have been canonical material dating back as far as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845), material that texts from Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1953) to Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) take as integral to their main character's struggles. With roots in Stepto's assumptions, and emphasizing the religious nature of the call and response narrative structure that Stepto employs, Leak compares contemporary and seminal texts to reveal the aforementioned traits' mythical impulses. By highlighting these features, Leak also begins a campaign to realign literary black masculinity with contemporary discourses in critical race and gender theory. In some senses a liberation of texts such as Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) from staid considerations of race men and cultural victimization, and in others a straightforward narrative of cultural uplift, Leak's work exemplifies the tone set for contemporary African American criticism. By using the idea of pregeneric myths to remind readers of the stakes of African American literary discourse, his analysis provides an updated reading of canonic texts, while aiding in the development of a still-marginalized academic discipline.

Leak's assessment of these essentialized race and gender traits evidences a continued concern for evaluating the role such traits play in the maintenance of the African American literary canon. In an effort to debunk the stereotypes, Leak works to explain their mythic traces while using contemporary texts to disarm some of the

problems those traits occasion. Working from the boundaries between narratology and historiography, Leak analyzes his chosen texts as stories representing an absent or suppressed history, thereby reactivating the structural problem of seeing mythic signifier as mythic sign. In some cases, Leak's argument tends to favor a revisionist history for generic gaps in the canon, and when this happens, the weight of his analysis seems to fall back on the habit of seeing racist and sexist traits as fundamental material for socially relevant criticism.²⁷ As Leak's argument unfolds, these stereotypic traits become the organizing factors for all the texts he encounters, promoting the idea that criticism's aim is to prove that black men are not developmentally impaired manipulative sexual predators. If the reader did not know that intellectual inferiority was a problem for black characters, she certainly would after reading Leak's analysis. The basis for male characters' struggles, these traits seem to encompass the characters' reasons for existing.

When Beatty's characters look at race and gender, they do so as individuals navigating a terrain strewn with complicated identities, rather than as predetermined traits against which they will inevitably have to struggle. Benefitting from Beatty's satiric wit, his male characters do not automatically accept second-class citizen status, nor do they lament their lots in life. When they cannot get past the labels they are forced to wear, they gloriously object, rather than ride out their narratives on a wave of pity or shame. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, for example, Nick Scoby—basketball phenom, poet, and blossoming jazzman—reacts to his own mythic traits with a consummate melancholia, opting to

²⁷ Leak's comparison of Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and Douglass's *Narrative*, for example, seems to read the former as a historical rejoinder to the latter.

disappear rather than lend more credence to the myth of the black man as exotic other.²⁸

An empowering stance, Scoby's decision to enact Gunnar's manifesto draws him as a character whose agency is undeniable. He may not be able to miss a basket, but he can stop playing the game, and in a manner that bespeaks more "Bartleby the Scrivener" than *Invisible Man*.

Why then, are these mythic traits perpetuated throughout the pages of African American literature, when Beatty makes it seem easy to design characters who simply disavow them? Houston Baker presents a compelling scenario in his meditation on modernism and black Southern boyhood, *Turning South Again*. He details a memory that recalls Stepto's first assumption for pregeneric myths. Even though Baker is "blessed by literacy" as a boy in Louisville, Kentucky, he can never escape a figure he describes as The Blue Man, a monster featured in a narrative that was "a grab bag containing snatches of colorful adult conversation, grim details of an Illinois black teenager mutilated and killed in Money, Mississippi, flashes from the Negro newspaper (the *Louisville Defender*) about police beatings and tavern brawls in black communities" (3). The Blue Man, Baker explains, "never lived anywhere but in our minds. Like the men in blue who have immemorially been 'pulling us over' because we are black, the Blue Man was always, already, everywhere in our everyday black male southern lives" (4). Baker describes an

²⁸ Scoby garners a national reputation as a kind of mystic because he cannot miss a basketball shot. He is haunted by this trait not long after he discovers it, and is eventually revered by and alienated from the basketball community. Because of his freakish athletic talent, his intellectual and creative genius go relatively unnoticed. Scoby finally commits suicide when Gunnar starts his "Emancipation Disintegration" campaign, a call for mass suicide as the ultimate sit-in.

environment colored by institutional racism and internalized negrophobia. The Blue Man, “a pure product of black southern boyhood rumor, a sinister function in a continuous narrative that was always enhancing itself,” provided a tangible representation of the mythic qualities against which Southerners like Baker fought (3). Working as myth, the Blue Man could then be everywhere and nowhere. He was myth itself, the continuation of a signifying pattern that could only enhance itself through further signification. This image of a boogeyman served a double function: to deter boys’ bad behavior, and to remind them of what they would inevitably become. The Blue Man insisted that Southern black boys frequently acknowledge and fear his presence. The boys needed him to manage the horror of a segregated, dangerous South, from which they would later assume “postures of strategic forgetting and tensional rewriting” that would help them to become tough black men (4). The traumatic symbol of the Blue Man, along with innumerable other race frights, continues to encourage a misrecognition of self in myth, and thus opens a path to the kind of criticism that Leak and others deliver.

Beatty deals with this mytho-historical burden by summarily addressing and dismissing it. He critiques such representations of canonized black male characters, and offers a way to see how myth prefigures literary history and illuminates the space between lived experience and historical tradition. In the opening lines of *Slumberland*, Beatty’s narrator explains that “[t]he Negro is now officially human,” and goes on to recount how the day before yesterday changed the course of African American art, culture, and most importantly, history (3). To understand this quote, it may be useful to develop Baker’s anecdote with Fanon’s psychoanalytic impression of an Other who

arises from an epidermalizing scene. Fanon explains that, in the Caribbean, the racialized, phenomenological body knows itself through an always already disempowering encounter with the racist, colonizing other. Through this encounter, the black body can only perceive itself as less than its colonizing counterpart because the very ground on which perception rests is controlled and exploited by this other. This “less than” status that the racialized body holds is a shrinking, reductive state, and the only way it can move in the world is in a fog of mourning that colors all of its experience (1967 112-114). On one hand, this othering experience is the foundation of colonial trauma and the root of African American experience. On the other, however, it is Fanon’s caricatured representation of the “winter day” on which such an othering experience happened to him. This epidermalized black man is cartoonishly pointed at by a series of white people, ultimately by a child who cries “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” (1967 112).

The individual in this othering experience, now covered by racist stereotype, is both lost in the grotesque exaggeration, and free to move subversively behind his mask of blackness. In this case, blackness is both a tool used to abject subjectivity and a barrier through which domination cannot pass. In myth, this tool operates through the figure of the trickster, a character who, through his keen awareness, can game any institutional system. Mythic representations of black figures such as Bigger Thomas, Teacake, and Stagolee show that the categories of gullible brute, young stud, and original gangster have been symbolized by a cultural tradition that understands blackness only as a limited selection of hegemonically predetermined traits. At the same time, however, these categories have been used to mask the lived realities of individuals. But what if, Beatty

questions, the fact of blackness became passé? How then might one experience what was once considered less than and other? Beatty begins *Slumberland* with the premise that since blackness is no longer an issue, it is now widely accepted that black folks are as human, fallible, gullible, silly as everyone else. And from here, through satire, he begins to critique the literary tradition that has consistently equated blackness with oppression, mysticism, primitivism, and shuck and jive tricksterism.

Following his opening declaration that the Negro is now officially human, Beatty goes on to review the rise of an African American history understood as a response to racist and sexist stereotypes. At one point in his review, the narrator recounts a typical encounter with a white woman who blithely asks “[m]aybe I’ve seen you somewhere before. Didn’t you rape me last Tuesday?” (*Slumberland* 4). This casual exchange illustrates how powerfully such a misrecognition affects not only one’s own understanding of historical position, but also how that misrecognition organizes others’ historical positions. This horrific quotidian encounter places the weight of a misrepresented history squarely on the shoulders of a black man who, merely by virtue of his participation in society, must always push against the legacy of stereotypes. Here, Beatty plays with the reader’s expectations of his narrator’s behavior. Of course the narrator is not a rapist. But the white woman acknowledges that she has no other way of recognizing him, and that her recognition is as commonplace as saying “Hey, don’t I know you?” which, under typical circumstances would be a friendly greeting, not an accusation. Beatty’s portrayal of this narrative exchange shifts the desire for recognition to the woman in the end, but the reader must still figure out how and why desire

contributes to the story's production. The reader wonders if the narrator will succumb to the woman's desire (he wavers at first) or if the woman's misrecognition is the foundation of his heroic journey (he leaves her at the train station, bound headlong into an extended flashback). Or might the reader's job be to trace the problem of misrecognition back to its source, to the absurd stereotype that keeps this particular symbol of oppression (black man as *de rigueur* rapist) simultaneously trite and current?

MYTH, NARRATIVE, AND HISTORY

Slumberland's introduction serves as an orientation to its narrative method. The story begins with a reference to its end, and moves forward until it reaches the beginning, which starts on the day before yesterday. Chapter One's declaration that blackness has finally become passé is buttressed by the revelation that African American history is not now and perhaps never was as codified or deterministic as folks thought. Looking to Edouard Glissant's ideas of myth, history, and literature will help to elaborate how such a revelation can work for a narrative laced through with mythologic potential.

Glissant describes the French Caribbean as "the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade" (1989 61). This dislocation, he argues, fosters a kind of non-history wherein collective memory is lost. Subsequently dispossessed of history and memory, the French Caribbean stands as a kind of unhealed injury whose symptoms are felt in the greater Black Atlantic. Beatty, in *Slumberland's* first chapter, shows how the effects of non-history proliferate into absurdity. He writes, "[s]o if you're still upset with history, get a lawyer on the phone and

try to collect workmen's comp for slavery," situating the problems of trying to maintain a corrupted past within contemporary institutions, namely the U.S. social justice system (*Slumberland* 4). Beatty's admonition to readers reminds us that history is impossible to quantify, but still operates as a work site. No law could rectify the injustice of slavery, just as no injured worker could prove that slavery was an on-the-job accident. This injury points to the known-unknown quality of its mythic occurrence. Glissant describes the known-unknown as the relationship between History as determined by the hegemonic, colonial West and the suppression of lived reality that is recorded in innumerable histories. History, for Glissant, is rendered non-historical through this suppression, a process that occurs through what he calls a series of missed opportunities, and he therefore calls Antillean history non-history (1989 61-2). Through Beatty's satiric rendering of some of the key issues involved in quantifying history and blackness, Beatty explains how history is itself burdened by questions of representation and interpretation, and transformed by individual experience. Thinking about representations of slavery passed down as myths (in the Caribbean, for example, the figure of the maroon, or in the U.S., tales of the Underground Railroad) may provide one way to see how contemporary history is built on wished-for truths, rather than the entangled facts of lived reality. Presenting history as an impossibility is a way to resist its teleological momentum while appreciating its importance.

Glissant further claims that

[Antillean] history emerges at the edge of what we can tolerate, [and] this emergence must be related immediately to the complicated web of events in our

past. The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present. (1989 63-4)

Describing particular events in the Caribbean, and focusing on the departmentalization of Martinique as a French colony, Glissant outlines the stakes of a re-imagined history and calls upon writers to comment on the obsession for history that dominates Western discourse and to relate those comments in a context that makes them useful for contemporary readers.²⁹ Myth camouflages and intensifies meaning, and history attempts to poke through myth's symbols, but those attempts inevitably fail, due either to the horror myth represents, or history's impossible complications that myth unsuccessfully elides. *Slumberland* ends with an "Epilogue to the Day Before Yesterday," suggesting that even something as seemingly accessible as the day before yesterday is actually open to historical re-interpretation, and not as firm as the calendar would lead us to believe. Beatty's day before yesterday is a place where what might have happened in the past is pitted against a mythical past that may not recommend a happy ending in the future.

A history relevant to dispossessed peoples makes an epistemological link between nature and culture. Nature, in this instance, includes the relationship people make with their surroundings, while culture refers to that people's cumulative experiences. Therefore, "[t]he problem faced by collective consciousness," Glissant argues, "makes a

²⁹ Glissant notes Brathwaite's comment that "[t]he unity is submarine" in this context and uses the quote as an epigraph in *Poetics of Relation*.

creative approach necessary, in that the rigid demands made by the historical approach can constitute, if they are not restrained, a paralyzing handicap” (1989 61). To avoid this paralysis, Beatty supposes that “[w]ay back when, and probably tomorrow, in the exact place where you now stand, something happened” (*Slumberland* 11). In this scene, the narrator is commenting on Berlin’s insistent memorialization of its nefarious history in mild, banal terms. The memorials, small plaques adorning otherwise placid corners and buildings, seem to say casual things like “by the way, people were mercilessly gunned down here not too long ago. Wait for the light before you cross the street.” These post-historical moments of realization, the way the narrator understands them, speak to an absent history, and mark what Glissant might term a missed opportunity. These moments give play to the notion that history might be something made up, even if it remains unclear what that something might be. The fictionalized institutional markers make tolerable what would otherwise be too shameful or difficult to admit: that the atrocities committed on such sites cannot be accounted for in a straightforward historical narrative. The markers themselves can only invite disdain and inspire a creative approach to understanding past events. They also remind the narrator, and impress upon the reader, that history is what happens when people are not looking. It happened yesterday, and it is sure to happen again tomorrow, but we will not see it. Right now, all we can do is imagine how this exact place can even be measured. In order to think collectively about how history works to reinforce mythic ideas, we first have to understand how those ideas came to stand in for the absence of history. We would have to imagine the complicated

lived realities of individuals who stood where the narrator and reader now stand. To do that, we would need leaps of creativity.

Beatty not only looks at Berlin's habit of minimizing history; he also examines how similar processes work in the U.S. In *Slumberland*, the narrator remarks that "America is always composing empty phrases like 'keeping it real,' 'intelligent design,' 'hip-hop generation,' and 'first responders' as a way to disguise the emptiness and mundanity" (13). America's lack of creativity is certainly evident in its proliferation of new empty signifiers. This lack, moreover, has an even more insidious effect on dispossessed populations who can only aspire to it. The combined dispossession and misapprehension of a viable history leads to a *disapprehension* of lived experience as a marker for historical potential. While myth works to fill this void, it cannot replace the veracity of real people being in the world. These empty phrases—"keeping it real," "intelligent design," "hip-hop generation," and "first responders"—pressure both the narrator and reader to resist the false consciousness created by the inadequate attempts such phrases make to mask reality.

MYTH, IMPOSSIBILITY, AND RESISTANCE

Slumberland's day before yesterday is the day on which anti-hero DJ Darky, accompanied by Monk-like jazz recluse Charles "The Schwa" Stone, played the perfect beat at the debut of the new Berlin Wall. This wall, at first built from recycled and reclaimed debris, and then from a continuous sound loop of the concert at which the perfect beat is unveiled, is meant to reinstate the kind of artistic and political freedom

occasioned by cultural invisibility and ignorance. When the beat is played, for two minutes and forty-seven seconds, everyone, East and West Germans, blacks, whites, Americans, and *Ausländer*, are all equally suspended on a defamiliarizing hook. And after this life-changing experience, no one can revert to a false consciousness regarding his place in the grand scheme of things.

The sound wall that “bisect[s] the city from Treptow to Pankow” demands that listeners “figure out for themselves if [it is] confinement, exclusion, or protection” (*Slumberland* 198). The wall functions as a sonic representation of difference, a reminder that the newly unified country is both heaven and hell, places interchangeable from both eastern and western perspectives. The beat gives structure to this wall, provides a language to protest unfettered capitalism, alienation, history, and especially commodified love, sold to both countries as either patriotism or a pair of Air Jordans. During its inaugural performance, the perfect beat mesmerizes the audience, so much so that, zombified, they seem to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. DJ Darcy, [p]eering through the darkness into the packed house...imagined the audience naked, but in this case the old adage was of no help because half the audience really was naked. In the back of the room couples clung to each other in the infamous Yoko-and-John-Lennon *Rolling Stone* pose. A conga line of streakers...molted from their clothes and deliriously snaked their way through the audience. A man stood at the front of the bandstand wincing as he pulled the hair from his nipples. The sympathetic African sandwich peddler gave him a rose and a hug. (*Slumberland* 225-6)

The scene goes on; DJ Darky “slapped the crossfader and hit them straight with the beat. No grease. The room went reverential” (*Slumberland* 227). The two minute and forty-seven second song builds an ontological structure through which its listeners can re-examine what they know about being alive. This beat functions as the mythological impetus upon which the rest of the narrative is based. Made from elements as diverse as “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and a nest of buzzing hornets discovered during a late night stroll along the Spree River, it careens toward the novel’s end like a leitmotif or a sampled break beat. Its force, in Barthes’ words, “has...a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us” (117). Without pandering to mythic tropes of the soulful black musician or life-changing tourist *Wanderlust*, the story ends where it begins, navigating race.

CHAPTER 3: ERIKA LOPEZ AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE

Erika Lopez is an artist, novelist, and performer whose work pushes at the limits of class, race, gender, and sexuality in ways that expand the categories at the same time that it challenges them. Classifying her work has been difficult because it crosses genres and utilizes a variety of media. Additionally, one form of her work often supports the others; for example, she toured her one-woman show, *The Welfare Queen*, in support of

her most recent book, *The Girl Must Die*.



Figure 1: *Poster for The Welfare Queen*

The poster artwork for *The Welfare Queen* helps to characterize Lopez's subject matter.

In the figure above, we see a stylized image of a woman whose sexuality, packaged, commodified, offered to pleasure seekers as a satisfying encounter with the exotic other, glares back at the viewer with a knowing look that shatters perceptions of exploitation.

This image, accompanied by the show, helps to demarcate the kind of spatial issues

Lopez explores. Considering the artwork as an integration of form and function, the space in which the art occurs is part of what the work means. Carving out a space in which to work is a key theme of Lopez's artistic endeavors. This book, almost ten years in the making, was her first collaborative publication, financed independently through a media collaborative called Monster Girl Media. Monster Girl Media's mission is to create and maintain a multi-media network of fans and artists, and provides a clearinghouse for Lopez's printed work and merchandise (Monster Girl Media).

Lopez's motivation to create such a collaborative is as interesting as her work itself. Her first Simon & Schuster publication, *Flaming Iguanas*, garnered much critical acclaim, but her relationship with the publisher ended in 2001, and her later work found homes in much smaller venues. Eventually, Lopez turned to social services to make ends meet, proving that the fame she had garnered for portraying uppity Latinas was harder to come by as a starving artist (Lopez 2010). The instigation for *The Welfare Queen*, Lopez's stint on government assistance was ultimately the creative push she needed to fully realize how pressures to trade in commodifications and stereotypes demeaned her work. She explains how the authenticity of her work defied pre-packaged marketing campaigns that sought to reduce it to the racist adjective reserved for all things Hispanic:

“spicy.” Boldly foregoing corporate sponsorship to keep her art from succumbing to approvals other than her own, Lopez’s experience on welfare became a synonym for having nothing left to lose in terms of creativity.

Her trilogy based on the character Tomato Rodriguez followed the harrowing misadventures of a generation X-style heroine who, in the first novel *Flaming Iguanas*, sheds the safety of her solid working class upbringing and hits the open road on a cheap motorcycle, part narcissistic Kerouac, part naïve young Che Guevara in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, except that this character is decidedly un-male. *Flaming Iguanas* introduces Tomato as a wary yet willing participant in a coming-of-age story for a woman old enough to know better. Written in a hand-designed signature font and illustrated in Lopez’s characteristic ransom note, love letter, dirty joke arts and crafts day style, these three novels became the cornerstone of her oeuvre in ways that set both her career and her critics on edge.

MEDIATED SPACE

Monster Girl Media refers to each of Lopez’s productions as “Another Erika Lopez Thang,” acknowledging that the work’s character centers more on the notion of a body of work than on a collection of discrete works. The creation and development of this body of work stands as an important indicator of how art and its affiliated media relate. This relationship, the same as that between content and form, is a key component of Lopez’s production strategy. Throughout the course of her career, Lopez’s work has continually drawn a necessary comparison between artful narrative and the way that

narrative unfolds. Using her own experience as an author whose notoriety was due in part to an uncomfortable submission to industry demands, Lopez comments on the way artistic space is measured by the publishing world, culturally incompetent readers, and a general unwillingness to engage difference on its own level (Lopez 2010). Furthermore, her work reflects a need to resist merely accepting the picayune allotment proffered to this moment's next best thing. In establishing her arts and activism collective Monster Girl Media, Lopez disavows the spatial limitations under which she previously operated (2010). Opting instead for spaces created and maintained by her network, Lopez highlights the politics involved in taking up artistic space, of demanding to be seen as master of one's own domain, rather than as a guest in someone else's media empire. The content of Lopez's work reflects this desire for self-ownership and mastery.

Linked to Monster Girl Media, but created and produced by Lopez herself, her cartoon blog, or clog, features her observations on contemporary life as an artist.



Fig. 2 *Front page of Erika Lopez's Cartoon Log*

With artwork reminiscent of a drain clog splattered across a pristine surface, Lopez presents her Clog as a rude reminder that surfaces, upon closer examination, are rarely as pristine as they may seem. Clogs disrupt the easy flow of resources, and it is appropriate that Lopez's insistence on taking up space stands as a reminder to reader that easy flows (of materials, of capital, of creativity) usually mask the harsher reality of production that often includes exploitation and manipulation. This Clog, made of labor, struggle, and minor understandings of the politics of production, audaciously reports on those productive circumstances, standing defiantly against the comforts of passively going with the flow. In her clog, Lopez comments on the cultural topics of the day with her usual keen sense of intellect and wry sense of humor. She offers some insight into her work's

themes on the Clog's home page. In an inaugural post she writes, referencing a film version of her novel *Flaming Iguanas*,

It's about GANG. See the paste up lines up close so you know how epic ventures are often mundane and tedious in detail. Know this as sure as you were about getting to the 6th grade one day and dying. Stick around as audacity makes its home here in this CLOG. And note how all different kinds of clogs—wooden shoes, wads of hair, these cartoon logs, and protests in the street—at their core, ALL have audacity in common. (Lopez Clog)

All of her work features the theme of audacity, and it is this feature that delights her ardent fans.³⁰ We might think of audacity as a necessary aspect of minority. The self-reflexivity required to maintain a minor perspective demands a certain forthrightness that continually frustrates authority. Confrontational by nature, her work exposes the slim differences between art, pornography, and literature, tackling all three in both form and content.

³⁰ In her article “Caged Heat: Erika Lopez’s Pulp Fiction,” Michelle Goldberg recounts interviewing Lopez: “[t]he first time I was scheduled to meet Erika Lopez, she didn't show up. I heard from her later that day, hysterically, adorably apologetic, but I wasn't mad, because Erika Lopez is such a brilliant falling-apart-at-the-seams whirlwind neurotic that you almost can't expect her to remember such boring concrete things as dates and times. We rescheduled to meet at a coffee shop deep in the Mission on Friday night, but when I got there, it was closing. I rode my bike around the block, and when I came back, she was there, all big tits and big hair, flashing eyes and rolling hips, swinging hoop earrings and smirking grin. Needless to say, the coffee shop owner let us stay.”

ART SPACE, POLITICAL SPACE

The personal connections between Lopez's life and work have always been present in the work itself. While her trilogy of novels (*Flaming Iguanas*, *They Call Me Mad Dog*, and *Hoochie Mama*) centered on the exploits of Tomato Rodriguez, her memoir *The Girl Must Die* deals more explicitly with the daily trials of life as an artist. In this text, the narrator explains

[t]his is partially my story, but I tell it not as the typical Litany of Offenses against me, for there are none. I am not here to add to the tomes of Victim Porn. I undid my childhood all on my own like a tourniquet too tight and careened into womanhood as if in a drag queen race gone awry: I was in such a clumsy hurry to be a penis scraper, I auctioned off my hymen at the bus station. At its best, this is not only my story, or even a manual, but also a Monster Girl Manifesto. A tome for those smoke-filled nights, hunched over in the car at 4:00 a.m. outside an estranged lover's house, when every woman looks in the mirror at her grades reflecting back at her, then tallies up her score and mumbles to herself: "*To be or not to be...*" and then the only question left is whether to set the car on fire or not.

(15)

A manifesto for anyone who has contemplated extremes, this narrative beginning provides a generative model that eschews passive spectatorship. It encourages readers to consider not only how texts are made and circulated, but also how the reader becomes an active producer of textual meaning. Contemplating "whether to set the car on fire or not"

sets the reader in a position to determine the strength of the narrative, as well as her place in it.

This kind of active engagement is part of a politics of space, both through the fan or reader's participation in the circulation of texts, and through the insistence that the work itself is part of an "M-pire" from which no reader can dissociate.

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The Girl Must Die

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WELCOME TO MONSTERGIRLMEDIA.COM ! THIS SITE IS A MULTI-MEDIA M-PIRE THAT WILL MAINTAIN MONSTER GIRL MESSAGES AND MANEUVER YOU THROUGH MONSTER GIRL MUSINGS. WE EVEN HAVE A MARKETTE IF YOU LIKE US ENOUGH TO WANT TO INVEST YOUR MOOLAH.

MONSTER MOUND OF ERIKA LOPEZ' BOOKS IN THE MARKETTE CALLING ALL BAMBERG AND LONDON MONSTER GIRL MOVIE MOGULS! MASSIVE MONSTER GIRL MOVEMENT COMING SOON!
 Posted on: Wednesday, January 5, 2011

Fig. 3: Monster Girl Media homepage

This M-pire, a take on early postcolonial claims that subjugated regions of colonial empires could, like the rebels in the *Star Wars* series, fight back by writing themselves into literary visibility, is one node in a lateral network of media producers and consumers identified by Monster Girl Media. As depicted in the design for Monster Girl Media's website, this network features Lopez's work as just one entry point into this resistant and productive space. Challenging corporate media systems and promoting a more generous and generative system of production, this "multi-media M-pire" asserts that art space, the

very space that art occupies in social life, is necessarily political space. Space, in this sense, functions not only as the mechanism through which Lopez's artwork is displayed—the space of the stage or page, for instance—but also as a condition of its reception. Deleuze and Guattari describe a situation in which a minor literature emerges from the cramped space within a major or hegemonic community, and here we might begin to think about her work as part of a literary decolonization process.

The concept of decolonization provides a way to think about a myriad of resistance, subversion, and negotiation strategies that aim to re-align power dynamics within colonized communities. The notion itself acknowledges the corrupting influence of colonial government, but it also suggests that a return to a pure pre-colonial state unaffected by non-native oppression is impossible. Deleuze and Guattari begin a useful discussion that attempts to describe something like decolonial circulation, and from here we start to see a different system of literary contact, negotiation, and exchange at work, one that not only accounts for minor ways of knowing and being, but also outlines an economy based on such navigation. Within this economy, space works as both a marker of artistic production—it frames a network of producers, and an accumulation of readers—and an organizing strategy that recognizes the text as the thing that moves within art space, drawing paths between interpretation and reproduction.

MINOR SPACE

We might think of the need for decolonization as describing some of the circumstances that occasion Lopez's approach. Operating on the boundaries of an

established literary tradition, her work interrogates the supposed distinctions between inside and outside culturally specific communities in an attempt to prove that minor ways of knowing and being are everywhere, and are thus legible to and available for the masses. In reading Lopez's work, the reader accepts a position that is always already minor because she is aware of its productive circumstances.³¹ Finding the remaindered or out-of-print work is also a task (made a little easier by Monster Girl Media), and finally reading the work itself requires some hermeneutic finesse. In this minor position, the reader must sort out her allegiances as she considers how she came to the work and how the work itself came to be. Deciphering the work necessitates minor ways of seeing, as well as an ability to code switch and deconstruct.

The work, because it does not sit comfortably in easily recognizable categories, resists a notion of margin and center. The distinction between the two has been used to assert the 'less than' status of not only underrepresented groups, but also alternative ways of thinking about what literature really looks like to readers. Lopez's work offers a way of thinking about space by virtue of taking it up; that is, the very scope of the work, its monstrous size, recalls an unquiet minority that twists oppression into a new kind of productive strategy. This kind of production defamiliarizes accepted textual notions so that each reader has to assess their validity. When the reader encounters a Lopez text, she is caught up in an economy of production. The reader's positionality—as a receiver of

³¹ In *The Girl Must Die*, on her clog, and in interviews, Lopez talks about the process of producing, publishing, and distributing her work, which generally involves different artists, graphic designers, small presses, and independent distributors.

circulated material, an interpreter of literary or artistic meaning, and as a counter-hegemonic subject—is reflected in the text’s productive capacity. The ways that Lopez utilizes space, both in the production of her work and in its circulation, suggests that a larger interpretive paradigm is at play, one where reading is itself a form of production. Because the ideas that her work generates literally do not fit within them, we see readers taking up the excess as material for their own contributions to the M-pire in new, minor ways.

Lopez’s popularity began with *Flaming Iguanas: an Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing*, published in 1997 by Simon & Schuster. This novel “thing,” centered around Tomato Rodriguez, displayed an innovative graphic design, composed by Lopez, who wrote and illustrated the work. The book’s style was influenced by both printmaking and zine techniques, featuring rubber stamp and wood block artwork, and cartoon line drawings. This style became her trademark.

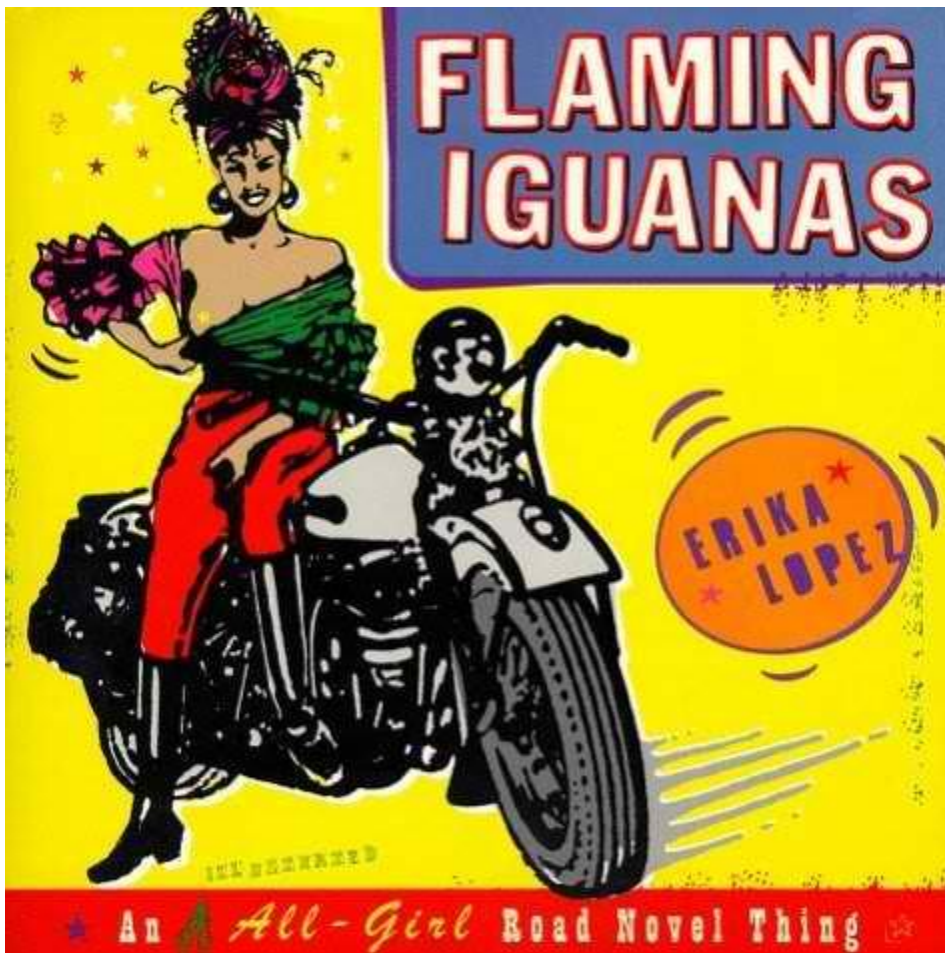


Fig. 4 Flaming Iguanas *trade paperback edition cover*

On the above image, we see that the woman has bared one breast, but that the potential obscenity of the image has been ameliorated by a gold star. This winking at the viewer/reader helps to characterize the relationship between a knowing, active reader and a culturally doped voyeur. Additionally, the mass production techniques both implied by the images and applied through their creation draws important connections between her work and the zine tradition that helped to revolutionize media distribution techniques.

After leaving Simon & Schuster, Lopez began circulating her work through independent venues, namely through a mailing list and networking with likeminded artists. The ‘hand

to hand' nature of her work is exemplified both in its content and distribution. Hailed by critics as raunchy and irreverent, her work was already primed for the kind of 'plain brown wrapped' delivery reserved for pornography, even as it was challenging the limits of mainstream literature, and the hardcover first edition dust jacket, brown newsprint with ink-blocked illustration, intimated what was inside by virtue of its wrapping, rather than by revealing its contents. Note that on this cover, the woman's breasts are covered.



Fig. 5 *Flaming Iguanas* hardcover first edition dust jacket

But rather than inviting pornographic voyeurism, her work critiqued just that culture of passive looking. It seemed to say, 'if you want to see a naked lady, you'll have to start by looking at her guts.' Much like zines sought to reveal the sordid underbelly of corporate corruption, nationalist greed, and elitist consumption, Lopez's work demanded that the conditions of its production be understood as part of a larger system of hegemonic

resistance. The DIY mentality behind the process of making and distributing her work became the rallying cry that helped to build her audience just as it further separated her *oeuvre* from general literary acceptance. We might begin, here, to think of her work as constituting a public in the Habermasian sense, as simply opening to political space wherein opposition can be registered. But both the form and content of her work suggest that such registration is not enough. Her work interrogates the notion of political space itself. We might accordingly ask how this interrogation works, and what results from it. To answer these questions, we must consider how Lopez's work utilizes space differently from traditional comics or literary forms. The first thing to do is to elaborate how semiotics play out in the narrative frame.

NARRATIVE SPACE

Scott McCloud describes the comics frame as a social schema, one derived from a synthesis of metonymy and closure, where the reader's mind fills in the semiotic gaps between the image on the page and other predetermined conceptions of what that image implies or represents (62-3). McCloud argues that, in comics, the reader makes meaning by closing the gaps between the panels. This closure is a way of suturing the activity in one panel to its successor. In traditional comics, in between the panels is where the crimes occur. The reader never sees the actual murder, but knows that it happens from reading context clues. Therefore, the 'crime' happens in the reader's mind, rather than on the page. This crime, appropriately, happens 'in the gutter,' the white space between comics panels. McCloud's argument revolves around the notion that interpretation is

itself a judgment, an unavoidable violence that the reader commits in the process of reading. In the gutter, meaning is made, and the reader commits the violence of interpretation (McCloud 68). “Violence” because the very act of interpretation reifies repressive disciplinary institutional strictures at the same time that it resists the idea of prescriptive law; that is, when interpretation feels ‘free,’ that is when it is actually least free. The misapprehension of a seemingly free interpretation stems from an unavoidable dissection of the text, a dissection that re-situates the text in the reader’s personal space, thereby making it meaningful for her. In traditional comics, those inspired by the serial comic strip, the straightforward arrangement of rectangular panels provides a totality to the narrative frame. All of the action (and such comics are generally action-based) occurs within expected parameters, on a disciplined stage, with the reader ‘trained’ to read certain visual cues that expedite the interpretive process. The story has a teleological arc, suspending resolution at the end of the strip, periodical, or book, so that each installment temporarily satisfies narrative desire as it develops. Neatly contained within the panels, the artwork rarely, if ever, challenges their boundaries. Readers learn to read events that happen ‘off-screen’ through closure, a technique developed by fantasy and imagination (particularly, in the case of action comics, through prurient desires). Any text that appears in the comic occurs in the service of dialogue or ‘voice over’ narration, and does not point to a reality outside of the narrative frame; that is, it is not self-referential, but intended to develop the plot of the story. In traditional comics, characters do not grow up or grow old, and they rarely learn sustaining lessons.

These strategies have become easily digestible, and the comics form, as described above, is abstracted and replicated throughout contemporary culture. One needs to be familiar with these disciplinary strategies to read Lopez's work. The narrative frame employed within it owes much to the practice of marrying words and pictures in such familiar ways. There is however, more to it than that. Embedded in the narrative training that fashions a comics reader is a meta-set of disciplinary practices, a politics of participation that sets the boundaries of comics experience and excludes numerous other interpretive trajectories. It is with this understanding that we can begin to read Lopez's work as minor, as attempting to challenge the limitations of an exclusive form.

Some remarks on the construction of Lopez's books: in them, the pictures, symbols, and words are presented as interchanging forms; one can be represented by another, none is more important than any other. Each form is, itself, irreducible; that is, none can be rendered into smaller constituent parts for the purpose of clarity or precision. Each text stands as an entangled narrative that would be nonsensical if the orthographic data were separated. The books are novels, but not graphic novels in the popular sense, with structured panels and plot-based narratives or collages of graphic memes that generate minimal story. These are illustrated novels, and even that description belies the overarching concept of artistry that centers each of the books. They are novels insofar as they present a character-driven narrative, divided into chapters, propelled by chronology. But the narrative is inseparable from the pictures it accompanies. Lopez, rather than trying to be a graphic novelist, blurs the boundaries between words and pictures like a comics artist, but presents a story that builds a comprehensive narrative from such

images. So, instead of a novel made more aesthetic by the addition of illustration, what is offered here is illustration made narrative by virtue of its frame—a different way to consider the intersections and boundaries between art and writing, between signifier and signified, between image and representation.

The image itself, read semiotically, is a composite of sensual and social elements, from the biological apparatus of the eye to the cultural infrastructure of reading. We might begin thinking about the image not as an object of our attention, but as the very thing that constitutes our attention, that subjects it to our notions of consciousness and awareness. The image, then, is a coalescence of thought and deed, theory and practice, knowledge and supposition, potential and delineation.

Not only did many Chinese immigrants die from building the first transcontinental railroad in the United States, but the rest of this book is also about all the Chinese immigrants who died in the making of this particular quote:

“Whatever doesn’t kill you... will eventually turn you on.”

If you’re one of those new fangled youngsters who thinks reading five pages is too much, that’s the only quote I can give you that’ll save you from having to actually read the rest of this book.

Fig. 6 The Girl Must Die *pgs. 8-9*

Dialectically, we might further think of the image as that which exists within a frame, as content made visible through structure, offsetting, parameter, the struggle between cause and effect. It is constructed, formalized. The image is what happens when one’s look is

returned. In the preceding image from *The Girl Must Die*, the reader is offered a double page spread of a fictitious quote. The text implies that thousands of dead Chinese immigrants occupy the white space of the page. So many, in fact, that the page cannot represent all of them, and so leaves the space blank, unpictured. Their stories, too, are innumerable, but coalesce in the quote, which frames their narrative. The quote's message itself, that survival equals at least a certain amount of perversion, provides the context in which to see the narrative twist itself toward minor sensibilities. The limitless bodies outrun the frame of the page, just as the quote itself spills from one page onto the next. The quote, unattributed, seems to have been said by all of these dead people, who will continue to speak throughout the remainder of the book. The text on the bottom of page 9 highlights the fact that even if the reader is unprepared for the enormity of reading this 400+ page book, she has already accepted its reason for being: these dead people will be heard. In fact, the reader has already heard them. And the book has barely even started.

When McCloud argues that the "blood in the gutter" between two panels is evidence that the reader is responsible for committing the violence that is interpretation, Lopez removes the gutter altogether, showing that the reader is already in the interpretation by virtue of holding the book (or being at the performance, or visiting the website, etc.).

...If you have to ask, you can't afford it. If you have to ask and can afford it, go get your money back. But really, if you have to ask, you shouldn't be here.

This is 4 those who aren't afraid to run like a girl, fuck like a girl, dance like a girl, demand like a girl, punch like a girl, love like a girl, writhe like a girl, kill like a girl, cry like a girl, throw like a girl, hate like a girl, bite like a girl, know like a girl, age like a girl, burn like a girl, fist like a girl, ejaculate like a girl.



Fig. 7 The Girl Must Die pgs. 26-7

In the image above, the litany of phrases ending in "...like a girl" reinforce the activity of reading, along with its messiness, its chaotic configurations, its process of re-evaluating the text, and its concomitant imagery. Apprehending this narrative situation, we understand that there is no 'outside' perspective from which to passively view the work. One cannot read from the outside. The jest in these pages from *The Girl Must Die*, the titillating rejection that the narrator delivers to the naïve or latent reader, reveals the tongue in cheek. That reader is, of course, already there and participating, even if she protests (perhaps too much). If there is any bleeding to be done in the course of interpretation, the reader will do it. There isn't any empty space in her work, no room for passive contemplation, no clear divide between signifier and signified. When the reader enters the text, she is the gutter, the back alley, the crime itself. In this image, we see a list of similes first in the typeset text, then hand lettered, and then, on the next page, a

portion of the text in cursive under multiple etched circles in a spiral. The cursive text on the bottom of the page is only partially visible, as the rest seems to have been pushed off the page. From this repetition we see the text itself enlarge, so that the original words become pictures, which then take over the entirety of the page, and essentially explode its frame. The page's edge, the text's frame, points to the limits of the text. On this last page, the lack of white space points to the impossibility of completing the task of describing for whom the book is intended. Because the image is both in and out of frame, the reader is forced to consider *how* she sees it. Committing closure, in this sense, is an act of self-evaluation.

To sum up, we might remember rebuses, those puzzles whose signs, de- and then re-contextualized, build a narrative out of both sound and sight. Implicit in the deciphering of a rebus is a notion of cultural competence, the ability to read appropriately in order to derive culturally meaningful messages from a seemingly random assemblage of phonogrammic images. In reading Lopez's work, something like a cultural competence is necessary not only to decipher the text, but also to understand the contexts which produced it. Whereas a rebus utilizes formal syntax to present grammatically sound statements in predictable ways, however, Lopez's art/work reconfigures the narrative frame to promote new and contingent interpretive possibilities that point toward a network of entangled problems and solutions. In this entanglement, we find what we might call our monstrous condition, the economic situation in which we perform the limits and necessities of narrative production.

CHAPTER 4: POSITIONS, NEGOTIATIONS, BEAU SIA

Beau Sia grew up in Oklahoma City, son of Chinese immigrants from the Philippines (Nguyen 2009, LouderARTS). His popularity as a performance poet began during his association with the Nuyorican Poets Café in the mid-1990s, when it was innovating the stylish performance-based competition known as slam poetry. While the slam phenomenon was growing and spreading nationwide, Sia's participation in the 1996 National Poetry Slam championships with the New York team was chronicled in Paul Devlin's 1998 documentary *SlamNation* (O'Keefe Aptowicz 136). That same year, he was also featured in *Slam* (Levin, 1998), a film that added a fictional, dramatic element to the art of performance poetry. The popularity of slam poetry in general, coupled with its commercial viability, opened the door for the TV series *DefPoetry Jam*, and later, a Tony Award-winning Broadway show of the same name, both of which featured Sia.

Sia toured with many of his fellow competitors, and published a volume of his own poetry, *A Night Without Armor II: The Revenge*, also in 1998. The volume, a rejoinder to pop singer Jewel's collection of poetry, *A Night Without Armor*, featured identically-titled poems that spoofed her angst-ridden, emotionally overwrought tone, and caricatured her pop themes of love, anguish, self-esteem, and individuality. In his volume, Sia displays an ironic distance that pokes fun at Jewel's work while it sets her themes in more critical contexts. His only solo book to date, *Revenge* parodied Jewel's sophomoric sentimentality even down to its record album artwork-inspired book cover. In front of words chicken-scratched in a juvenile hand (in ballpoint blue), a photograph of Sia appearing both goofy and earnest looks out at the reader. On the back cover photo,

he's tugged the neck of his shirt down to reveal the bare chest over his heart. On her cover, Jewel has her hand inside her shirt, over her heart, as if she were saying a sexy pledge of allegiance. Sia also released two recordings around this time, *Attack! Attack! Go!* and *Dope and Wack* on the Mouth Almighty label, an organization created by and for former Nuyoricans. After touring solo for a few years, he returned to film. Of his film appearances, perhaps the most notable to date is in Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married* (2006). His filmed performances also include a music video for TV on the Radio's "Wolf Like Me" (2006) and a series of television commercials for Trident Layers chewing gum (2009). Returning to performance poetry as an educator and workshop participant, Sia recently released one poem per day over thirty days on the social networking site Facebook (2011), and is currently promoting a forthcoming volume of poetry titled *The Undisputed Greatest Writer of All Time*. He continues to tour college campuses as a performer and advocate for young poets.

Sia's career, though founded in performance poetry and begun during his training in NYU's Dramatic Writing Program at the Tisch School of the Arts,³² can be read as a negotiation of the art of performance itself. Through different media, his performance of performance reflects both an interconnectedness between form and content and a necessary critical distance between the two. Fundamental to satire, this interconnectedness is an important part of social critique, and Sia's utilization of satire, as it focuses on defamiliarizing established notions of form, fulfills the satirist's goal of

³² Sia discusses his training and aspirations with Gary Mex Glazner in "Beau Sia: Bright Lights of Broadway."

taking it “upon himself to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desired and civilized norm” while being “a kind of protest, a sublimation and refinement of anger and indignation” (Cuddon 599). In considering this definition, it makes sense to begin by characterizing Sia’s work as a response to some of the limitations and hypocrisies of conventional performance genres that insist upon regulation, exclusion, and gravity. In this sense, we might consider the role that *détournement*, “the reversal of established relationships between concepts and...the diversion...of all the attainments of earlier critical efforts” (Debord 144), plays in the creation his work, and think about it not solely as a strategy of resistance in the face of oppression, but also as a learned response to artistic deficiency, as a mark of self-criticism and responsibility. For *détournement* also emphasizes “the necessity for *distance* to be maintained toward whatever has been turned into an official verity” (Debord 145) and therefore calls for a degree of suspicion about authenticity or efficacy in performance.

When performance becomes a ‘working out’ of its means and ends, when it focuses not only on making meaning, but also on how that meaning is made, the resulting effects remain both relevant and immediate. Included in these effects are the importance of organizing and managing contingent communities, the celebration of thoughtful ways of knowing and being, the joy of self-in-otherness, and the realization of form as a condition for experience. These considerations, what we will later explore as part of an economy of performance, are what continue to make meaning in Sia’s work legible. Instead of eagerly submitting to what Debord describes as spectacle, wherein “reality

unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation” (12), Sia’s work-as-production can be read as anathemic to passive contemplation, as revealing the problematic relationship between image, or appearance, representation, and meaning. But what is the nature of that problematic relationship? What constitutes it?

DERISION, SELF-REFLECTION, AND ACTING OUT

The role derision plays in the satirist’s responsibility to “bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desired norm” is critical. Derision, that scornful, contemptuous laughing, retains a connection to its mocked object; that is, a derisive gesture always acknowledges an investment in the maintenance of that which it mocks. Derision always validates its object while marking out a space to resist it. When the subject’s derisive gaze falls upon the object, the object gains weight; it carries not only the brunt of the looker’s contempt, but also its own subjective potential. But a critical response to such a looking goes further. Rather than ending in a schema of ‘looker’ and ‘looked at,’ of a simple internalization of roles, the derider’s task is also self-reflective. He must engage that interpretive space that derision provides, where subject and object meet. It is in this space where resistance is developed, catalogued, and meaning is made. But this space, governed by the asymmetrical power structures to which derision erstwhile responds, is contingent, unpredictable at best, opaque at worst. Characterizing the role derisive space plays in subjective transformation, Glissant poses the problem as a crisis of faith.

For Glissant, the process by which Caribbean subjects transform from African natives to diasporic transplants is a process of creolization. Creolization abandons the idea of a “fixed being” (Glissant 14). In this process, “[r]elationship (at the same time link and linked, act and speech) is emphasized over what in appearance could be conceived as a governing principle, the so-called universal ‘controlling force’ (Glissant 42). “Western thought,” Glissant continues, “although studying it as a historical phenomenon, persists in remaining silent about the potential of the slave trade for the process of creolization” (42). Caribbean slaves, he argues, no longer able to access the lands from which they came, displaced internally at home and abroad, having physically survived the trauma of middle passage only to land in colonial slavery, leaving their descendants a nostalgic view of “Africa” and a desire to recapture what was stolen from them, experienced a crisis of faith in their now distant gods and traditions. This crisis, exacerbated by further developments in sociocultural oppression, changed the ways they thought about themselves as Africans, as Caribes, as slaves, as Westerners, as spiritual people.

These new Creole subjects adapted their worldly natures to the lands on which they were forced to work, and in which they learned to prosper. Glissant explains that “because to have to change to an unprecedented degree forces the population to desecrate, to view critically (with a kind of derision or approximation), what, in the old order of things, was a permanent, ritualized truth of its existence,” survival necessitated ideological reconfigurations (14-15). The old order gone, the new order oppressive, faith, suspicion, and distance came to coexist. Centuries later, Haitian independence and the

legacy of colonial oppression continue to color not only the ways Creole subjects understood their own histories, but also the ways that very history was constructed and perceived by colonial powers. The problem of faith in a nostalgic past, terrible present, and uncertain future persisted. Faith in the past, in an origin story, in a return to the motherland, or in a sense of Pan-African unity such as the one fostered by literary Negritude, could only intensify the problems that creolized people faced. Their Caribbean experience had completely altered their relationships to these once-accepted truths.

This crisis of faith had manifold repercussions and could be read in a variety of contexts. Notable among them are performative situations where acting “as if” had concrete social meaning. In contemporary Francophone Caribbean cultures we see the legacy of “passing;” social markers determined by skin color and hair texture tell a colonial story without end. The discourse necessary to see the difference between a nostalgic essentialism and the Creole experience requires a double movement. One should recognize the motivation to disempower the systematic and insidious program of social enervation that kept blacks linked to the horrors of slavery and colonialism, but one should also understand that, from this program, tremendous social change emerged.

Richard Schechner deals with the foundations of the relationship between representation and performance when he explains that the connections between “dialogic and body-oriented psychotherapies, ethological studies of ritual, performance in everyday life, and play and crisis behavior... reveal ‘deep structures’ of performance that underlie historical configurations of ritual and theatric performance” (xiii-xiv). In the two planes of performance, where historic and traditional processes are girded by the above

practices, the role of ‘deep structures’ in the production of any particular performance becomes clear. The dialogic relationship between act and actor constitutes the basis of theatrical performance and offers a means to consider the breadth of performative action. Accordingly, “[t]hese deep structures include preparations for performance both by performers...and spectators...and what happens after a performance,” while the final element entails “determining how specific performances feed into ongoing systems of social and aesthetic life” (Schechner xiii-xiv). The idea that deep structures make social life legible is one that is important for performance in general, but especially pertinent when reading Sia’s work. If we read his work as active, as eschewing the languid contemplation of spectacle and attempting to delineate performance’s boundaries, then we can see the importance of dialogic movement in both the works’ production and performance. Bakhtin explains that “we cannot, when studying the various forms for transmitting another’s speech, treat any of these forms in isolation from the means for its contextualized (dialogizing) framing—the one is indissolubly linked with the other” (782). In other words, context is itself a form of critique that is constantly at play in performance. Moving through performance, then, is a way to politically situate that critique, to emphasize it.

The kind of “acting out” that Sia showcases emphasizes the fact that parody, mimicry, and even a certain brand of hysteria are key parts of his poetic subject matter. Since evaluation is elemental to performance’s deep structures, these particular modes reveal a vital contextual awareness; that is, the evaluative aspect of performance, whether through satire or other means, invites a critical self-reflection that helps to affirm the

performer's sense of agency, and opens an interpretive door between performer and spectator. This door is the proscenium where governing structures are at work conferring subjectivity on both performer and spectator, marking one through the constitution of the other, which in turn makes both visible. Subjectivity, then, as Althusser has explained is a correlation of government and recognition (116-7) that, in this case, extends from the stage to other performative discourses.

Margaret Werry, for example, discusses how the connections between performance, governmentality, exploitation, and tourism are revealed through programs of governing race and space in ways that constitute 'bio-poetic' subjects who enact positions of difference.³³ Tourism, in this sense, is another kind of "acting out" for both native and traveler. We might think of the economy of performance mentioned earlier when we consider the contexts, such as tourism, in which it operates. In general, the space in which performance occurs, as Werry points out, is configured not only by the entrance of actors, but also the potential of the social, the realm of communal experience and desire, to take it up, to include it in a social network, to make it productive, to circulate it. To illustrate how acting out works from a performer's point of view, Gabrielle Civil explains that, in performance, her body moves through space as an exercise in 'making literary' bodily gestures, constraints, and capabilities. Through the

³³ In "Tourism, Race, and the State of Nature: On the Bio-poetics of Government" Werry contends that tourism, with its bio-political imperatives, relies "on a repertoire of bio-poetical performances, investing the subject imaginatively in forms of conduct that are viscerally embodied, expressive, creative, improvisatory, and even eroticized" (391). These forms of conduct govern the performative possibilities for the tourist encounter, as well as delineate performance space.

exploration that is performance, she enacts a distinction between self and other in discourses of race, gender, and other power structures in order to negotiate interior versus exterior spaces. These located and subsequently dislocated spaces open to the positive charge of the body in performative motion and reveal the negative supplement of the performance event (Civil 2010). In reading Sia's work, we might continue to think about the borders between positive and negative space, both on the stage and the page. Looking for these intersections is a way to see how his work circulates in a literary system, to acknowledge its satiric engagement, to identify some of its dialogic contingencies.

THE BODY AS WORK SITE

Sia's work enacts, but also blurs the distinctions between poet and actor, between producer and consumer, so that each role reveals an immanent other. One way to imagine his overlapping boundaries is to consider the work of La Pocha Nostra, a performance collective led by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes. In an interview, Gómez-Peña explains that one of the goals of La Pocha Nostra's performance workshops is to "find new ways of relating to our own bodies. Firstly, decolonizing them, then repoliticizing them as sites for activism and embodied theory, for memory and reinvention, for pleasure and penance" (119). Because the body must be decolonized before it can effectively produce and participate in what Gómez-Peña calls a "clumsy democracy" (122-3), it has to move through a series of steps, a process of recognition that claims otherness, or other ways of knowing and being, as part of its productive circumstances. The lateral discourse through which the performer rearranges his body is,

for Gómez-Peña, radically political. Another of La Pocha Nostra's goals is to "find new modes of being and relating to 'the other' in an un-mediated way, bypassing the myriad borders imposed by our professional institutions, our religious and political beliefs and pop-cultural affiliations" (Gómez-Peña 121). Lateral relationships, in this sense, are discursive and pedagogical. They examine and enact the treachery of crossing borders.

The notion of fluidity presented here, of a "constant fleshing out of...civic, aesthetic and theoretical muscles" (Gómez-Peña 122-3), responds to some of the contextual problems of performance in any given space. For Gómez-Peña, performative spaces are colonized by institutional, social mechanisms that must be dismantled and then reconfigured to produce a performer who can better understand his own role in a democratic production of citizenship. These institutions, written on performers' bodies and evidenced by the way they move, their level of comfort with certain gestures, their ability to change positions, to pause, to reflect, to learn, demand analysis. Movement, then, encompasses physical acts, the mental processes that precede and accompany those acts (such as the process of changing one's mind), and temporal accounts of being in time, that is, of occupying different spaces successively. For Sia, his performance style shows how he uses his body as a work site, as a place where conflicting roles meet, challenge one another, and switch places. The poet, through the difficult and contingent postures he assumes, is an actor; a performer is also an audience, a reader of his performance. A producer of meaning, in the process of production, consumes. The swiftness of Sia's performance amplifies the intensity with which these roles contact, reverberate, reconfigure, and finally, re-present.

In the music video for TV on the Radio's "Wolf Like Me," Sia's character parodies the main character in Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video. Riffing on the archetype of the sexualized horror movie victim, Sia's character provides a commentary for Jackson's performance of masculinity. The line Sia delivers to co-star Naima Mora (of *America's Next Top Model* fame): "You're not like all the other girls," twists Jackson's line to co-star Ola Ray: "I'm not like other guys." By negotiating raced and gendered roles in this twisting (the video features several shots of Sia contorting his body), Sia's character occupies them in a game of catch and release.



Fig. 8 Ola Ray and Michael Jackson in "Thriller," dir. John Landis (1984)

Fig. 9 Beau Sia and Naima Mora in "Wolf Like Me," dir. Jon Watts (2006)

Additionally, the viewer understands that Mora's character parodies both Jackson's and Ray's characters. Her visage, compared to Ray's is ethnically ambiguous, and the response she delivers to Sia's line: "Why? Because I'm Canadian?" helps to further

challenge any notion of particular racial belonging. In this parody, Sia's character is black and not black, feminine and masculine, victim and threat. The storyline played out in the first figure above is reconfigured in the second. In Figure 8, Jackson teases Ray about being scared by the horror film they just saw in the theater as they dance down the street, right before he turns into a zombie. Earlier, in the 'film within a film' that is the video's frame, Jackson's character turns into a 50s teen wolf. In Figure 9, Sia bravely approaches Mora on the dance floor and they dance together before she turns into a werewolf.

"Wolf Like Me," a song about unhealthy love in the face of self-perceived deformity and deficiency, reads counter to "Thriller," a song in which the protagonist promises to thrill more than any horror fantasy. In particular, "Wolf Like Me's" lines "Charge me your day rate/I'll turn you out in kind/when the moon is round and full/gonna teach you tricks that'll blow your mongrel mind/baby doll I recognize/you're a hideous thing inside/if ever there were a lucky kind it's/you you you you" present a picture of love in and of otherness that is absent in "Thriller's" "I'll save you from the terror on the screen/I'll make you see... 'cause I can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try." The sentiment in "Wolf Like Me," echoes that in Sia's other work in which he bemoans the fate of being an Asian American underdog who can't successfully woo girls.³⁴ When he assumes the pose of the dreamer early in the video, and then takes

³⁴ In particular, Sia's poem "Horsecock Manifesto" humorously challenges the notion that Asian men are sexually and socially submissive. Additionally, many of the poems in *A Night Without Armor II: The Revenge* allude to the difficulties of pursuing women.

that pose again when he lands unconscious in an alley, we can see how the character both expresses movement and plays on its performative structure. The repetition we see in the character's movements emphasizes the problem and necessity of reading and re-reading power dynamics. In the first pose, Sia's character is asleep, helplessly dreaming of his love. In the second, though initially helpless, his "transformation takes" and he becomes the wolf, a predator like everyone else, a "hideous thing inside," while still a minor subject negotiating the boundaries between predator and prey. His exaggerated movement, a mimicry of convulsive pain and horror, highlights questions of power and agency in order to make fun of them, but also to show how they make meaning.

In reading Sia's performance in this video and in his other work, it is also useful to consider a fuller definition of the term "body" when speaking of decolonizing it, as Gómez-Peña does. Natalie Melas, reading Fanon, takes us back to earlier explorations of the body³⁵ when she explains that the racialized, phenomenological body knows itself through an always already disempowering encounter with the racist, colonizing other. Through this encounter, the body can only perceive itself as less than its colonizing counterpart because the very ground on which perception can be achieved is controlled and exploited by this other. This "less than" status that the racialized body holds is a shrinking, reductive state, and "[a]ll that remains of the phenomenological body as a vehicle of experience and movement toward the world is the cloak of mourning" that colors all of its experience (Melas 175). Can the truth of bodily identity be found under such a cloak? For Fanon, his body returned to him after his epidermalizing encounter "sprawled out, distorted, recolored" (86), self-recognition is a dismantling experience that

³⁵ See Chapters 1 and 2 for additional explorations of Fanon's schema of epidermalization.

requires a reassessment of his environmental circumstances. Reading his body in a double movement from both the inside and out, Fanon establishes a basis for colonial engagement, an idea to which we will return with Glissant.

Absent from Melas' reading, however, is Fanon's own stylistic description of the "winter day" (86) that accompanies this recognition. As he carefully exaggerates and repeats particular sociolinguistic scenes, they pile on top of one another, producing what might be called, for pedagogical purposes at least, a caricature. This caricature functions as more than just a cartoonish portrayal of racial hatred and alienation; it also reveals the agency of its illustrator. Fanon is no comedian, just as the crisis of subjectivity he outlines is not funny. What is interesting, however, is the preference of many of his readers, Melas included, to deny the possibility that he might be playing with the reader in order to shed critical light not only on the trauma of colonial experience, but also on one of its most popular forms of resistance, carnivalesque humor, that brazen gutbusting that doesn't equalize the experiences of oppressor and oppressed, but that points out the folly of oppression. This type of play, this play on words, shows the body to be not less, but more than the sum of its distorted parts. The body is bigger because of this colonial encounter, not smaller. It stretches past the limits of oppression toward more meaningful linguistic gestures. While cloaked, to be sure, it still produces. Under such a cloak is a set of tools designed both to protect the wearer and to get him out of (and into) contingent dilemmas. Through Fanon's scene, we see that the body is precious, quotidian, abject, marked, exploited, and malleable. It receives and distributes. It tricks. Thinking about Fanon's phenomenological subjectivity, and the diverse ways that it can be read, stresses

the necessity of performance when addressing the difficulties of both private and public representation.

PERFORMING FORM

While Sia's subject matter deals with socially pertinent topics such as the complexity of identity and artistic reception, its form displays a preoccupation with the structures that make such topics visible. In his poem "an open letter to the entertainment industry," for example, Sia opens with the request that "if there is anyone/in the audience/in the entertainment industry/watching me perform,/I want you to keep in mind/that if you are casting any films/and need a korean grocery store owner,/a computer expert,/or the random thug/of a yakuza gang,/I'm your man" and then continues with "if you want the caricature/of a caricature,/then I am that caricature" (citation from *Bum Rush the Page*). On first reading, we see that "that caricature" is buried under two others. But which caricature is "that" one? Is it the hungry actor willing to take demeaning work? Is it the scheming actor who steals such work from others? Is it the sad cynic whose willingness to blackface his talent turns into self-destruction? Or is it something altogether different, an invocation of the absent caricature, the deictic "that" which points away from the text toward a potential that can only be realized by the reader?³⁶ The ready

³⁶ Jonathan Culler explains in *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, that "[d]eictics are 'orientational' features of languages which relate to the situation of utterance [including] anaphoric articles and demonstratives which refer to an external context rather than to other elements in the discourse" (165). In this case, Sia's "that" functions as an anaphoric article that refers back to the performative subjectivity that governs and hovers over the reading and performance of the text.

answer to all of these questions is “yes.” The positions offered in these lines overlap. In them, the narrator marks himself as being there, as the figure addressing the audience, but also everywhere, as an indescribable other, one whose capability for being caricatured dissolves as quickly as it is invoked. This kind of complicated figuration often comes across to critics as a droll self-obsession or egotistical rant, points on which the slam genre is often criticized,³⁷ but Sia’s work in different media offers a critical way to interpret the complexities therein. Though the version cited here refers to the printed version of the poem, Sia’s performance of it on *Russell Simmons’ Def Poetry Jam* reveals additional characteristics. He delivers it in typical Sia style, in a holler, with forcefully exaggerated motions that help to place it firmly within his oeuvre.

What the narrator offers in this poem is a performance of the rules by which caricatures operate; in other words, he offers a contrivance, one that is necessary for navigating racial realities. The reality of such a performance, rather than representing a commodifiable stereotype in the service of the entertainment industry, acknowledges the

³⁷ For example, in his review of the film *SlamNation*, James Bowman explains that the poetry slam is “a kind of competitive sport involving mostly execrable poetry and the borderline exhibitionists who write it for performance before vast arenas of enthusiasts.” Positive reviews of the genre echo the sentiment, but in less judgmental terms. In “Poetry Slam in Germany,” Konrad Engalschall reports of a neighborhood German slam poetry scene that “[t]he average age of both the audience and performers is consistent with the demographics of the [Prenlauer Berg] neighborhood—that is, between the ages of twenty and thirty. It is no surprise, then, that the themes addressed in the performances are themes that speak to the audience and alternately celebrate and criticize the scene. Noteworthy is that the audience seemingly welcomes the exposure of the open hypocrisy of their lives.”

impossibility of embodying such a stereotype. This reality reveals the stereotype's absurdity. It shows that trying to be an Asian American man by trying to occupy the role allotted for 'Asian American man' is not only ridiculous but also inconceivable. A poem about being an Asian American man trying to represent a commodifiable, remunerable view of Asian American men might not really fit into a letter. It also might not work as a poem. It might only work as a performance of the ways in which it is not a poem, not a letter, not a stereotypical representation, but an acting out of the ways it resists those categories. We might, again, read this poem and its performance simply as *détournement*. But in addition to turning the institutional apparatus of poetic form against itself, this poem can still be sold in place of the poem about Asian American identity that, in reality, can't be written.

Another, similar way to consider this interaction between form and content, between the reality of Sia's performance and the parody that its content provides, may be through speech act theory, which suggests that the embodiment of a particular role is an enactment of that role; that is, the role exists only when it is performed. The performance of such a role is a speech act, and that act has a temporal, ritual, historic aspect that situates it both in a particular context and, through repetition, delimits that context.³⁸ This understanding of how performance influences its reception finds some purchase in the interpretive gap between act and actor, where the representation of one necessitates a

³⁸ In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler explains that the speech act, constitutive, violent, potentially injurious and defensive, is the means through which we understand the very notion of vulnerability. It is the act which necessitates linguistic agency; that is, it illustrates the need for a critical politics of representation (1-5).

representation of the other. It shows how the very act of performance involves the same critical properties that govern interpretive practices, which influence the ways that people derive meaning from those practices. In other words, performance opens up meaning. It makes meaning legible while, at the same time, making it possible. In this sense, something like a performative utterance both prescribes and describes experience. Austin's famous example of "I do" in a marriage ceremony illustrates how this notion of performativity works. The spouse both enacts the marriage vows ('does' them) and promises to abide by them (will 'do' what is asked of him/her). The vows themselves have no meaningful existence outside of this instantiation. Without proper context and delivery, they would be infelicities (Austin 237).

For Sia, the possibility of being infelicitous is bound up with the truth of representation. To say "I am that caricature" in a poem that seeks to explore and expand ideas about Asian American representation, while insinuating that Asian American men cannot, in fact, be accurately represented through such a static form, is to make the kind of statement Austin describes as unhappy (237). Involved in this infelicity is a question of propriety. Austin explains that convention and procedure prevail for determining when an utterance can be accepted as invoking the act it claims to perform (238). At issue here is the context I which the utterance "I am that caricature" is performed. That context, the not-poem, the not-letter, is the unhappy reality of the situation. Austin explains that those marriage vows only work when taken, or taken up; that is, they are only valid when performed through ceremonial mechanisms. He clarifies:

By means of...explicit performative verbs and some other devices, then, we make explicit what precise act it is that we are performing, and the quite different matter of *stating* what act it is we are performing. In issuing an explicit performative utterance we are not stating what act it is, we are showing or making explicit what act it is. (245)

Sia's performance of his not-poem, not-letter, is then a means by which he seeks to change the context of statements produced and performed in poetry. That context is bound up in the critical problematics of representation.

Thinking about movement might elucidate the problems of representation in the connections between the form of Sia's work and its content. The impossibility of full representation and the need to work through a series of postures that, however fleeting, express his situation, are the crucial elements that connect his body, his voice, to his subject matter. These aspects of movement provide a mechanism for analyzing the kinds of problems he's exploring. In order to understand the stakes of his particular exploration, it is useful to first consider the relationship between performance and aesthetics. Austin's claim that "[p]hilosophers at least are too apt to assume that an action is always in the last resort the making of a physical movement, whereas it's usually, at least in part, a matter of convention" (237), is an introductory stance on the primacy of aesthetics in performance. A discussion of convention, procedure, and appropriateness follows Austin's statement, and leads to the suggestion that a performer's movements are not to be taken literally, but in the spirit of the circumstances under which they are made. Specifically, he says that "in the course, for example, of acting a play or making a joke or

writing a poem” the performer may not actually mean for someone to “[g]o and catch a falling star,” but to reflect on the metaphor or to somehow otherwise consider the artistry of his utterance or movement (241). An obvious aspect of performance, the perceived value of the metaphor helps to establish its validity; that is, the better the performance, the more it means for its audience. Aesthetically, this audience includes the performer himself and his ability to navigate the circumstances of his performance so that the circumstances themselves are elevated, charged with meaning. What Engelschall failed to note about the German audiences he observed was that the response to a slam performer hinges upon how well that performer can represent himself as one of them, as one whose own interests in the medium are subsidiary to the group’s political desires for acceptance and validation, desires which include a recognition of the various kinds of hypocrisy that culminate in everyday life. To move through those circumstances, to consider issues of performativity, the deep structures that mitigate the nature of performance, the role of the performer as representative of a particular, idiosyncratic, and necessarily shifting point of view in the face of political misrepresentation, the audience and its needs for relevant thought-provoking material, requires facility and mutability.

Therefore, questions of propriety sustain the movement in Sia’s work. Even the poetry that is only available in written form shows a preoccupation with the amount of effort it takes for the performer or reader to move through it. Hyperactive, even bombastic, it is the pace, pitch, and rhythm with which the work is delivered that emphasizes its versatility and flexibility. The work’s swift intensity offers one perspective, and then another, and then another, so that interpretive possibilities topple

over one another in their rush toward certainty. This is the point—that interpretation is infinite—but only insofar as it can be acted out. Movement, therefore, is the primary means through which meaning is established.

Far from languishing in the notion that the message and medium are one, however, Sia's seemingly fundamental concern with movement and its properties is part of a larger exploration of critical issues. His work suggests that the poem is no end unto itself, but a recognition of the difficulties surrounding identity, community, and art, and his attitudes toward these difficulties seem to be constantly shifting. He excels at movement. Interested in concepts of play, Sia's performances, whether as an actor, poet, or musician, are dominated by both a sense of immediacy and physicality. Sia's work, written, spoken, performed, is an outburst. It is disruptive, comedic, and fantastic. In performance, he shouts, hypergesticulates, preens, all to articulate the positions from which he speaks. Importantly, he moves rapidly between positions in the appearance of desperation, as if compelled to keep moving. Both the content and structure of his career lend credence to this compulsion. Noting that he graduated from a dramatic writing program, a program designed to foster film writing, his desire to take poetry to other media (television and social networking, in addition to stage and film) has resulted in a host of characteristic performances that, either subtly or overtly, bring his poetic concerns to vastly different audiences, something that most poets just do not do.

Sia's variety of media formats coincides with a variety of formal delivery considerations. In his poem "conquered, colonized, colonialized" he writes that the poem is "written by [his] mother, as writing device" and goes on to record a solemn epistolary

introduction that is signed by his mother before beginning the actual poem with an invective “welcome to the third world, bitches!” (Sia 2007 165). The effect of speaking in his mother’s voice thrusts the narrator into three overlapping positions.³⁹ From the first, we see the boyish poet using colloquial techniques (capital letters absent, rampant slang) and performing the role of obedient Asian son, displaying a kind of filial piety that brings to mind images of Americanized children reading to and writing for their non-English speaking immigrant parents. He also occupies the role of a witness struggling to represent an immigrant’s voice, full of quiet dignity filtered through trauma. These two roles engender a third: the poet proper whose diatribe condemns the situations that brought the poem about. The interconnection of these three positions, and the space that each occupies within the poem and its necessary performance, illustrates the problem of faith that Glissant outlines in his explanation of creolization. Sia negotiates the stances he takes in the poem, complicates them, and provides the kind of record necessary to see the minority within each, as well as how those minor positions overlay, embrace, and demarcate one another.

Glissant’s process of creolization, and the problem of faith that stems from a dislocation from an unknown home, is exemplified in his description of the Martinican proclamation of March 31, 1848. This proclamation effectively freed slaves from their

³⁹ Sia’s more recent YouTube post of his poem “asians in the library of the world: a persona poem in the voice of alexandra wallace” echoes some of the same stylistic sentiments: the affectations of a feminine woman, her manner of speaking and tone, and the satiric presentation he makes when he performs in these positions.

plantation bondage, but was delivered in such a way that the slaves themselves remained unsure of their new place in Creole society. Glissant compares the reception of the proclamation to the current social climate that continues to oppress Martinican and Antillean subjectivity. He writes that “[t]his text from the ‘past’ is disturbingly contemporary. We can only tear ourselves away from derision by staring directly into it” (1989 37). The proclamation, written by a Martinican civil servant with the bureaucratic title of Provisional Director of the Interior for the French Republic, seeks to squelch any political foment among the slave communities in the wake of France’s republican status and subsequent colonial dissolution. The proclamation’s writer, a man named Husson, tells the slaves (in both French and poorly translated Creole) that they must be patient and submissive, that change is coming, that the law is on their side if only they will remain obedient. The tone of the proclamation is mawkish, fawning. Husson describes a scene (that Glissant critiques) in which humble, grateful slaves, upon hearing that the new French republic will abolish slavery, serenade their masters. Glissant’s research, however, tells a different story of the proclamation’s reception. He describes how the slaves who heard, and the few who read the proclamation accepted it as a kind of bad joke. They sneered at it. Their sneering, as Glissant describes it, was a learned response to colonial treachery. But the sneering did not last. The proclamation, a harbinger of postcolonial injustice in a structure of systematic dispossession, represented a new kind of treachery, one that Fanon extensively outlines in *The Wretched of the Earth*.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Fanon describes the development of this new treachery in his depictions of the newly minted middle class who “ought to consider as its bounden duty to better the calling fate has marked out for it, and put

Imbedded in this document are the seeds of postcolonial failure, seeds long dormant and overlooked. Glissant's objective is to examine the derision, the necessarily, intricately failed mimesis that the document represents. In doing so, he unravels the painful humor that inaugurates and perpetuates the figure of the buffoon, the minstrel, the trickster. Martinican slaves immediately understood that Husson was, essentially, a coon. What they later understood was that he was essential to postcolonial production.

Derision, ugly as it is, provides an opportunity to examine the harshness of the postcolonial condition, that peculiar condition of being unfree in the face of celebrated freedom. Husson's proclamation reveals derision's duplicity. One aspect shows how the document's purple language only reinforces the distance between the colonial subject and the world of the colonizers; no matter how well the subject speaks the colonizer's language, he will only look like a fool doing so. The other presents the audience's response to such a performance. Playing a bad role is one thing; playing a bad role badly is another.

The double movement that Glissant suggests, "tear[ing] away" by "staring directly into" derision, is crucial to understanding postcolonial politics, situations, distances. Because derision works by a forward-backward movement, it serves as a negative manifestation of faith. For the postcolonial subject to tear himself away from the crippling belief in a hopeful return to origins or a bestowed egalitarianism with his

itself to school with the people," instead of turning into a group "set at peace into the shocking ways—shocking because anti-national—of a traditional bourgeoisie, of a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois" (1963 150).

postcolonizers, he would need to stare directly into that which cripples him, to see its value, to analyze the distance between the impossibility of being free and the potential of a creative future. It mattered little whether or not Husson believed that what he was writing was truthful or if it represented any kind of reality that Martinican slaves could actually approach. What mattered then, as now, Glissant points out, is that in his guilty performance he inculcated himself into a scheme that began before him. In doing so, he created an important opportunity for political development.

Beau Sia stares directly into derision. An often laughable performer, his sense of humor belies and amplifies his intensity. In Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married* (2008), he plays Norman Sklear, the "wedding czar emcee" who hosts his friend's wedding. Prancing around in neon pink sunglasses, Sklear's antics keep the mood of the party, which is ever on the verge of despair, elevated. Most of Sklear's lines are improvised by Sia⁴¹, and his clownish appearance provides a much-needed antidote to the suffocating anguish evinced by the lead characters, whose melodramatic self-destructive tendencies make the film painful to watch. In this film, as in his poetry, Sia plays a mediator, one who both echoes and refutes opposing discourses to help develop the narrative. In *Rachel Getting Married*, his interruptions highlight the tension that pervades the film, while they also provide some much-needed comic relief to drive scene transitions. At the end of one scene, for example, Rachel, the bride, and sister Kym, the

⁴¹ The script's scene direction notes Sklear's behavior. It says, "[t]he audience of revelers is clustered at one end of the room with drinks and appetizers, while at the other end, various friends take their shot at a brief rehearsal. Old friend Norman Sklear is emceeing the lineup—he is currently at the mike with a funny improv based on really disastrous weddings he has known. Everybody is laughing" (Lumet).

addict, are arguing about Kym's role in the wedding. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that no one trusts Kym (or even likes her), but the awful reason for their mistrust has yet to be revealed. At the end of this scene, the film transitions to a series of shots at the wedding rehearsal dinner. The atmosphere at the dinner is pleasant, but the awkward mix of characters is noticeably stressful, and made even more visible by the rivalry between the two sisters (Rachel: successful, kind, classic. Kym: brash, inelegant, destructive). As the rehearsal scene begins, we start to understand Sia's role more fully. His improvised monologue about disastrous weddings distracts the guests from their discomfort (the multiracial wedding is subtly presented as an additional awkwardness) as well as suggests that this wedding, too, will be disastrous. By shifting the attention away from the ugliness of the awkward situation, he calls attention to it, and in trying to make it better for the characters in the scene, the viewers are distinctly aware of the impossibility of improving upon such a dismal state of affairs. What makes Sia's role so provocative is that he isn't reciting from a script, but responding to the situation (artificially created though it may be) as an improviser, as someone whose job it is to take the temperature of the crowd and then respond accordingly. While he is certainly limited in the scope of his response by the confines of Lumet's script, he still has to decide how to maneuver through the horror of bourgeois dysfunction, both as an element of that dysfunction and a response to it.

Sia's role in the film, like his roles in other media, alludes to the kind of minority we have been examining throughout this project. Moving from one minor position to another, Sia shows how negotiation is the key to accurate representation, as well as

functional reading. Resisting stereotypes by transforming them into fluid performances, Sia offers a method of being-in-reading that is at the root of minority. The plurality of those performances, their speedy replacement of one by another in a different form, resonates with a conception of minority as the infinite other that comprises the reading experience. This kind of reading resists prescriptive limits in preference for a dynamic exploration of interpretive potential that more closely represents how minor subjects actually perceive their hermeneutic impulses.

CONCLUSION

Upon completing the research for this project, I realized just how much more needs to be done to fully express both the method of reading for the minor and its timely approach to comparative literary studies. But by re-reading the works of the authors whose texts provided the force of this investigation, I began to see how reading for the minor is not just a political strategy or a structuralist imperative, but also an investigative avenue in its own right. What I mean by this is reading the work of Beatty, Lopez, and Sia with such a critical lens proved to be as much a self-reflective process as it was an engagement with greater ideas about being in the world as a reader, as one who encounters texts and reads them for the simple reason that she can, and wants to. This added estimation of the value of reading for self-satisfaction, along with its necessary social participation, is one that is not always acknowledged in critical theory, which generally opts for a more social and politically engaged method.

Far from crying "*l'art pour l'art*," that resistant, insistent demand that art be encountered on its own terms, for its own sake, this realization strikes a more intimate, and accordingly, politically vibrant chord. A demand that art exist for its own sake may be an appropriate call during our decade-long war on terror; it may emphasize the need to recognize opposition to violence as a valid point of view. It may also touch on a societal desire to create rather than destroy. But reading these texts, for me, was a reminder about the place of art and literature in a reading life as much as it was a reinforcement of the principles behind reading for the minor.

As myth forms the backbone of a body dispossessed of its land, heritage, and culture, so too does this methodology shape a life of reading. Myth, as explored in Chapter 3, offers a way to consider how history is formed, and why historical gaps feature so prominently in literature, and furthermore, how those gaps are covered and uncovered by mythic structures. Reading for the minor might also be thought of as a way to cover and uncover reading practices, as it seeks to fill in the gaps left by hermeneutic authority and victor-inscribed histories of actual readings.

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