

Blurb Methodology/Discourse Analysis

My dissertation project seeks to investigate ethnic and postcolonial literatures in order to delineate the conditions for a literary anthropology. The contemporary texts under scrutiny self-reflexively stage representations of ethnicity and simultaneously negotiate their own boundaries and transgressions *as* representative ethnic/postcolonial texts. Criticism commonly situates these literatures within a tension of politics and form/aesthetics, with a general tendency to put emphasis on the former. Although there is clearly no escape from the political realm since the struggles for recognition and around representation are still going on and strategic essentialist positions are, under certain conditions, valid und necessary, I want to shift the emphasis to formal aspects in order to show that the texts interrogate basic premises of political argumentation that build upon essentialist notions. It seems to me that through such a focus on form and narrative strategy we can regain a more differentiated discussion of ethnic and postcolonial literatures in general.

My methodological chapter will encompass a discourse analysis that situates the problem of the ethnic, in the sense of otherness and alterity, as evolving out of a complex interplay between ascription and self-definition. In contrast to oppositional models like Abdul JanMohamed's (1983) Manichean aesthetics, concepts like W.E.B. DuBois's double-consciousness or Frantz Fanon's colonial dynamics, especially in re-readings by Paul Gilroy (1993), Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Diana Fuss (1995), account for a heterogeneous formation of ethnic and colonial experience which poses the question if the subaltern can speak or not that, in turn, is actually the question if 'we' are willing to hear the subaltern voices and engage with them (see Gayatri C. Spivak 1986, Homi K. Bhabha 1994 and Benita Parry 1987 for an oppositional reading of the two). While this shift in discourse has certainly resituated the power relations as a more complex negotiation, the multicultural paradigm that Bhabha attacks so convincingly is still prominent in popular discourse and academic institutionalization. It is also through an investigation of academic mechanisms that I formulate my critique and reassessment of the treatment of ethnic literatures.

Can U.S. ethnic literary studies still uphold the differentiation of the subfields according to the ethnocracial pentagon (David A. Hollinger 1997) when ethnic literary texts draw from a variety of literary traditions and sign systems? Under what conditions can we develop a comparative framework for American ethnic and postcolonial literatures that escapes a mere parallel arrangement like A. Robert Lee's (2003) which formally reproduces the institutional boundaries of the multicultural paradigm? Two recent studies will especially inform my

considerations: Deepika Bahri (2003) seeks to balance aesthetics, politics and economic aspects and Dean J. Franco (2006) suggests a working definition of ethnicity to account for its displacements and ongoing redefinition. In addition, I aim at a reactivation of the so-called 'School of Ethnicity' (Werner Sollors 1986, William Boelhower 1984, Herbert J. Gans 1979) that has been scolded for overlooking aspects of historical materiality; these theorists nevertheless provide us with a comparative framework that emphasizes formal aspects and narrative strategies. Sollors' dynamic of consent and descent and especially Boelhower's structural framework deserve a rereading since they address the rhetoric of ethnic literary texts rather than their functioning as representatives for political criticism. I am certainly not arguing that the politics of recognition and difference has come or should come to an end (see e.g. the debates that have emerged around Charles Taylor 1992), but I think that through a complication of the notion of representation which transcends the mimetic and thus also resituates the political is inevitable to capture not only the strategies of literary texts but also to rethink the premises of our interpretive paradigms.

Stuart Hall (1979) marks a starting point with his argument that alongside an ongoing politics of recognition we witness a gradual transformation to a politics of representation that develops the new shifting and hybrid ethnicities he proclaims. Engaging Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's (1967) philosophical account on the concept of representation as well as David Leiwei Li's (1998) attempt to transfer Pitkin's considerations to Asian American studies, I argue for a differentiation of what U.S. ethnic literary studies commonly mean by 'representation.' As academic discourse and several debates among and around authors (e.g. The Harlem Renaissance's negotiation of black dialect versus 'regular' English, Frank Chin versus Maxine Hong Kingston, the debate about Louis Ann Yamanada's 'racist' depictions of Filipinos) exemplify, there seems to be a conflict between an inevitable discursive expectation that the ethnic text should not only represent ethnicities authentically but also that the ethnic writer should stick to her own ethnicity; the latter presumption generally fuels discussions about a politics of experience. While I consider such debates as symptomatic for an essentialist discourse that presupposes that there is such a thing as a correct-as-authentic representation and that thus still seeks to incorporate and categorize writers according to the supposed authenticity of their representations, I argue for a more complex understanding that instead relies upon the notion of an ever shifting and ever *corrective* ethnic representation. If we acknowledge that representation, especially in a literary text, is an act of performance (Wolfgang Iser 1987) we must also adjust the critical apparatus of U.S. ethnic literary studies by pointing out that representation is inherently instable and that the ethical validation of

certain representations is subject to historical and local changes. Thus, I differentiate between a political realm of 'being-representative,' that dominates in U.S. ethnic literary studies and that threatens to suppress/reduce the complex negotiations of the literary texts, and a notion of representation that allows for a transgression of such a mimetic understanding. It is within the tension of these two notions that I investigate the literary texts in my study. Such a confrontation, in my view, has serious consequences and ultimately opens the field to a catalogue of questions posed by Sander Gilman:

Where should ethnicity be placed in any professional discussion of literature? What makes a writer 'ethnic'? Is it the writer's identity as given by circumstances or by labeling? Or is it the writer's self-identification? Then why not study the claims of ethnicity through the pseudonymous works that represent the ethnic writer as part of their fictions, especially when these claims resonate with the stereotypical perceptions of at least part of the audience? Is ethnicity therefore primarily a quality of the reader, actual or implied? Or is ethnicity a quality of marketing or the mode of production? All of these questions postulate the importance of the 'author' or 'reader' as a social phenomenon in the definition of literature. But what does one do 'after the death of the author'? Do such approaches mirror a vulgar materialism that has little or nothing to do with the truths espoused in the literary text? And what impact does this have on the professional reader, the critic? Is the critic's ethnicity a factor in the production of academic critics? (1998: 12-13)

It is this network of questions that guides and informs my study. In order to address the questions Gilman poses with an adequate methodology, I suggest Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality as transposition, formulated in her seminal study *The Revolution of Poetic Language* (1974). Rejecting an understanding of textual relationships as mere source or influence studies, Kristeva is interested in the meaning production of literary texts in general and thus allows a more complex conception of the literary text as shifting between several sign systems which may or may not overlap. Attached to this notion of a text that operates on several medial registers and is thus continually under construction, is an insistence on the position of the literary subject which equally finds itself in an ever provisional state of being. This double focus on shifting textual and individual identities can also be found in several concepts within U.S. ethnic and postcolonial studies, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Signifying Monkey* (1990), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland* (1987), the notion of Diaspora (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002), Gerald Vizenor's *Trickster* (1989, 1990), or Tina Chen's figure of the *Double Agent* (2005). All these rhetorical figures and narrative concepts revolve around the crucial line between formal aspects and politics. They investigate this borderline, some of them more in rhetorical and formal fashioning, some more in the realm of identity politics. Kristeva's transposition encompasses these theoretical figures and, at the same time, enables not only the negotiation of the liminal area established by form and politics but also points toward a concept of ethnicity and ethnic literature as an ongoing deferral. Thus, I claim

to offer a framework which might situate ethnic and postcolonial literatures in a comparative perspective that allows a reconciliatory investigation of the suture between form and politics; it simultaneously introduces the notion of a literary ethnicity which I discover in the texts under scrutiny (concerning the recapturing of Kristevan transposition in terms of ethnic literatures, I am indebted to an unpublished talk delivered by Peter Schneck). My methodology is also informed by an understanding of these literatures in interaction with marketing strategies and paratextual layers. In a complex interplay of being-marked/self-marking and being-marketed/self-marketing *as* ethnic/postcolonial, the self-reflexive prose texts that I analyze co-produce, reshape and comment on the conditions of their production, promotion and reception (see e.g. Graham Huggan 2001). The problem of ethnicity as a commodity is also inextricably linked to ethical aspects as my analyses will reveal.

The decision to concentrate on contemporary texts in order to make a general argument about ethnic and postcolonial literatures needs certainly justification. Yet it is precisely due to the texts' self-reflexivity that such broader statements are enabled. Conceiving ethnic representation as a performative act, I consider it possible to draw more general conclusions that concern the relationship between authorship and text. In effect, this amounts to a critical investigation of ethnicity as a criterion of (performative) representation that is generally available to any writer and therefore needs an ethical anchoring to be developed in the epilogue of my study.

The chapter on Alexie's short prose piece "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" and his introductory essay to Percival Everett's novel *Watershed* must be regarded as complementary to my methodological discussion. I argue that Alexie offers a negotiation of the American Indian text and the question of authorship by playfully addressing the problem of representation. I consider this self-reflexive text as symptomatic for ethnic and postcolonial literatures in general. Engaging several medial frames and sign systems, Alexie negotiates some of the most fundamental questions and problems concerning the modes of production and reception of these literatures – questions that are also raised in Gilman's essay quoted above. Alexie formulates a critique of reductive images of Native Americans in popular culture. Through an unmasking of ethnicities as constructs, he forces us to interrogate what we accept as a valid representation of Indianness. At the same time, he urges us to rethink one of the most fundamental premises which inform academic criticism, namely that a Native American text must be written by a Native American author in order to be acceptable. Ultimately, I contend that Alexie offers a basic outline for an understanding of ethnic fiction as transposition that is linked to an ongoing corrective ethics. This corrective textual practice

acknowledges that there are misrepresentations while at the same time arguing that there is no correct-as-authentic representation.

While Alexie manages to resolve the representational burden in a comical play, Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* negotiates the problem quite differently by staging ethnic (textual) identity as a drama. In an exhaustive and repetitive deferral between sign systems and medial registers Kincaid points toward the impossibility to escape ethnic ascriptions. Yet as I read her text, she also plays with the potential of transgressing the gendered ethnic text by reclaiming an identity which is located in the emotional realm. It is vital for an understanding of Kincaid's novel that the position of the narrator is unreliable since it oscillates between retrospective comment and immediate involvement. Through an interpretive focus on the functions of photography, painting, and writing, as depicted in this highly self-reflexive text, I show that *Lucy* insists on a highly individual and personal authorship position. Deconstructing all possible labels we can possibly attach to the book, Kincaid seems to put emphasis on a radically individual authorship that nevertheless is structured and oppressed by ethnic and gender discourses.

At least two other analyses will complement these two: Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), too, engages a variety of medial registers and literary traditions in order to complicate receptive processes and to interrogate ethnic textual identities. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2001) interests me for two reasons: He offers a literary critique on the hysteria of identity politics within U.S. academia and, through the use of representational modes like the *novel of passing*, he stages a play on ethnic authorship and cultural appropriation.

In effect, as my readings reveal, the formulation of a literary anthropology of ethnic and postcolonial texts as transpositions between sign systems is inextricably linked to ethical considerations. While an insistence on a 'correct' representation necessarily falls short since it presupposes that there would be an essential, authentic ethnicity to be represented, there are certainly misrepresentations which, in turn, rely upon essentialist and stereotypical reductions. This is why ethnic authorship matters in a severely legal sense. But how exactly do we conceptualize this authorship? As I aim to show with the selection of my texts and my analyses, a text which engages several ethnic sign systems does not necessarily have to be written by an author whose identity we anchor in one of the ethnicities she employs for her fiction. The interpretive premises that commonly inform discussions of ethnic literatures – such as close ties between the author and his ethnic community that amounts to the paradigm of being-representative or the establishment of a cultural archive – are valid and necessary but

they are, from my perspective, not sufficient in order to conceptualize an ethnic literary anthropology.

The problematic which evolves will be discussed in an epilogue that engages a fictional work like Dave Eggers's latest novel *What is What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006). The book takes the question of performative representation versus being-representative to another level since the Sudanese refugee Deng's foreword authorizes Eggers as his mouthpiece in order to produce a "lightly fictionalized book," as the newsletter edited by Allegheny College, where Deng now studies, puts it. Do 'we' accept such a book as ethnic or postcolonial literature? What are the conditions that determine what and whom 'we' include or exclude from 'our' category? An analysis of Eggers's text will be contrasted with Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007). Thus, the epilogue adds another layer to an ethics of transposition since it takes up the fundamental questions posed by Gilman's article and also by Alexie in his short prose piece and resituates them, politically and economically, in a global and transnational context by addressing matters of agency and political intervention.

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