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Literary Citizenship:
Culture (Un)Bounded,
Culture (Re)Distributed

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This paper offers theoretical considerations of the ways in which literary postcoloniality in the teaching of Canadian literatures constitutes both a continuation of and a departure from the institutionalized history of literature as a key mode of delivery in civic education. To say that postcolonial pedagogy continues and departs from the institutionalization of literary studies is to say something of such obviousness that it would seem not to bear repeating, yet it is precisely to “the obvious” that pedagogy must attend insofar as both pedagogy and the obvious perform so much social—and so much complex—work. An equal obviousness that underwrites my thoughts about the past and the potential of literary citizenship is that literary studies are being conducted in an era of globalization: the very categories on which the dominant curricular edifice has stood—the categories of territorial sovereignty and cultural sovereignty as mutually constitutive—can no longer (pretend to) bear the weight of cumulative geo-temporal changes and the concomitant diversification of culture. The fact that literary studies can no longer operate as a vehicle for expressing and organizing a would-be homogeneous social structure is not, however, an argument not to use the literary for a heterogeneous but nevertheless shared social structure.

The present moment of globalization implies also a post-cultural moment in the anthropological sense that “cultures” are no longer pro-
duced, experienced, or distributed as bounded, or, as localized and particularized to a “people,” or to “peoples” who can then be compared. This post-cultural moment implies that culture is no longer susceptible to analysis in bounded ways (see, for example, Howes; Appadurai). But the present moment of globalization also harbors the historical impetus of postcolonial responses to those much earlier moments of globalization, known as imperial and colonial territorial expansion: invasion settlement that was both armed by and in the midst of producing the apparatuses of state. This historical precedent of postcolonial responses to globalization remains grounded in geo-temporal, social, national, and state specificities. To put together the terms postcolonial and Canadian literatures, as this volume has done, and as many of us do in our places of critical and creative work, is to keep on the table for discussion how the literary and the national remain categories and modes of productivity and reproducibility. Together, they constitute both historically developed (and therefore immanent) and temporally imminent sites for arguing that culture represents not only the bounds and parameters of identity but also the less bounded but equally crucial processes of identification. National literary cultural expression has been both a source of and a response to colonization: as such, postcolonial literary studies are necessarily a methodological hinge between what is possibly the end of a malignant cultural nationalism and the beginning of perhaps a more benign globalization. This methodological hinge opens a door onto the possibility that citizenship can be critically acculturated in a university literature classroom.

Such ruminations arise directly out of questions raised by my teaching, research, and curriculum administration over the past five or so years. At the undergraduate level, I have been teaching (primarily) Canadian literatures, along with methodology courses (critical practice and theory); at the graduate level and in my research, I have been examining and asking questions of cultural nationalisms in the context of globalization studies. I have also worked on major curricular revisions during this same period, revisions that were in part designed to begin to move away from the more traditional structuring of the literature degree by categories of national literatures. This particular confluence of activities has required an almost daily engagement with questions about the future of the discipline of literary studies: what is the social and political function of literary studies at the present time and in the immediate future; what is the object
of literary studies? what knowledges and effects do literary studies produce? whose work are we or should we be asking our students to read, why, and by what methods, with what assumptions in mind? These are, of course, not new questions: what is new, as Foucault might have said, is “the event of [their] return” (58), the temporal opportunities for altered dispensations and dispositions (opportunities deftly pursued by such postcolonialists as Homi Bhabha [e.g., “DissemiNation”] and R. Radhakrishnan [e.g., “Ethnic”]).

I work in a university that is fairly representative of Canada’s white anglophone mainstream: though my campus is less than 100 kilometres from Toronto, one of the world’s most multiracial and multi-classed cities, the student and faculty population, though changing, is still predominantly white, middle class, Anglo-Celtic, Protestant (especially the faculty). So my ruminations arise from working in this location, among this demographic, and from what I see as the need to capitalize on two things in particular: one, that most undergraduate literature majors love literature; they love reading, they love form, and they love language (even though they may not always use it with the precision that they or I might like); they love and honour creative writers; and they understand themselves to be of a social minority for that love, not least of all because it seems to imply a forfeiting of any chance of well-paid employment; and two, that most undergraduate majors are both very fond of Canada and not unfamiliar with its shortcomings even if they occupy spaces of racial, linguistic, and economic privilege. These two things, a love of literature and an analytical fondness for Canada, strike me as not negligible opportunities with which to work.

They suggest that the category of the national and the category of the literary continue to be important heuristics with which to proceed. As a major vector of historical processes as well as a major vector of analysis, the national remains useful in our attempts to cross the major divide of globalized life—the divide between increasing social fragmentation on the one hand, and an increasing need for alternative methods of social integration, on the other. Literary studies that continue to work in methodologically specific ways with the category of the national offer forms of political and historical knowledge as forms of civic education; they offer a means of developing what several postcolonial literary scholars, among them Smaro Kamboureli and Len Findlay, have been calling critical citizenship, pro-
duced through a critical comparative approach to both minoritized and majoritized discourses within the Canadian nation-state (see Findlay’s call to “Always [i]ndigenize” and Kamboureli’s strategy of “negative pedagogy” [25]).

Minoritized literatures remind us that nations are made, not born, and are thus open to refashioning. Majoritized literatures, if studied historically and comparatively, also remind us that nations are made, not born. It does not follow, however, that the nation is a category to be dispensed with; rather, the category of the national remains necessary to think with at the present juncture of inter-national and intra-national relations. The national is a category that, while it produces structures of majority and minority, nevertheless is operating at its historical limit, as Stuart Hall and others might put it, using the deconstructive language of Jacques Derrida: globalization, particularly in its economic forms, has put the nation as a category and a structure “under erasure”; the nation is “no longer serviceable” in its “originary and unreconstructed form,” and yet it is necessary to go on thinking with the nation, seeking legal recourse through the nation, doing business through (though not for) the nation, and performing cultural critique with the nation in its “detotalized or deconstructed” but nevertheless still operative “forms” (Hall 1).

This space and moment of the nation at its limit is also the space and moment signalled by those inaudible parentheses in my paper’s subtitle: binding and/as unbinding, distributing and/as redistributing, but doing so within a methodologically bounded space that is also, perhaps, operating at its historical limit, the category of a national literature. What I want to suggest here is that it might be necessary to invest a little longer in the ongoing power of the nation as a referent and a concept in the literary domain, even as we may disagree with the term’s uses, or may be wary of practices in its name. Literary citizenship entails communicative acts that function to the degree that they do precisely because we perform (in part) as subjects in our production and recognition of the attributes of Canada as a nation and of literatures as modes of identification, even though and even as we are differentially positioned to do so. While it is true that such terms as nation, nationalism, and culture do not have singular or stable meanings, they are terms that nevertheless circulate in day-to-day power relations, inside and outside of the geographic entity of Canada with sometimes pernicious but always sufficient stability to make a difference.
The terms *nation*, *nationalism*, and *national culture* circulate widely; they have explanatory and other kinds of power; they have a high though not homogeneous recognition factor; they are key to certain actions and affects in the world despite their ambiguity; and despite their relative diminishment by certain processes of globalization; and they are contentious terms precisely because people differentially located and empowered cannot agree on their contents and are differentially on the receiving end of the meanings and practices of these terms. All of which, again, makes the category of the national *not negligible* for literary analysis and the cultivation of critical citizenship. And if you’re troubled by that formulation “not negligible” as a negative statement, then that makes at least two of us, but I cannot say in advance what the category might be positively, because I’m not thinking about the category as content but as method, as a set of relations, as potential.

Just as the category of the nation remains important, so too the category of the literary remains crucial to think with as a specifically cultural practice. In both the aesthetic and anthropological senses of cultural practice, the literary can perform work that cannot be performed elsewhere in the social with the same degree and kind of affect and freedom. The fact that the literary is less powerful in neo-realist political terms than, say, the International Monetary Fund, does not mean that we should give up on the literary as a form of knowledge or intervention. Homi Bhabha, among others, defends precisely this “specific value of a politics of cultural production; because it makes . . . [the cultural text] the grounds of political intervention, it . . . extends the domain of ‘politics’ in a direction that will not be entirely dominated by the forces of economic or social control. Forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional cultural practices” (“Commitment” 20). I want to argue for the continued value of literary culture as a form of interventionist diplomacy, not as a form of bridge-building or “wilful illiteracy” so carefully excoriated by George Elliott Clarke (183, n.14; 168); rather, interventionist diplomacy might be a practice of acquiring wilful literacy to produce forms of communal knowledge of people different from yet similar to “ourselves,” whomever we are.

But I want also to relocate this interventionist diplomacy within the notion that culture, and literary culture in particular, represents ourselves
to ourselves: this inter-articulation, this coming together of both inter-
national and intra-national representations, is crucial to arguments for the
political productivity of the postcolonial literary, whether those arguments
are made by creative practitioners or critical practitioners, from majority
or minority positions, because inter-national and intra-national represen-
tations are the substance of today's multi-faceted practices of both speak-
ing for and speaking to the people with whom we live, even when such
speech may be unintended altogether. If you'll permit such a paradoxical
phrase here, it is simply of the nature of social life in the present that
creative literatures constitute both inter- and intra-national speech. "Can-
dian" literatures are written by and read by people who are not the same
but who are similar, who share species similarity (see Gilroy), who live in
interlocking geopolitical public spheres, and whose repertoires include
mass communications media. In this present temporality and spatiality of
the nation, I think literary studies speak to and speak for, to quote
Adrienne Rich on the political problem of the pronoun, "We who are not
the same. We who are many and do not want to be the same" (225).

This kind of willingness, even necessity, to risk the first person
plural under certain circumstances parallels a willingness to risk a new
form of cultural nationalism in the present. As R. Radhakrishnan has
asked, "Is nationalism . . . 'always already' corrupt and defective in its
agency? Whatever the answer may be in the long run . . . it is crucial for
the postcolonial subject to produce a critical and deconstructive knowl-
dge about nationalism" ("Nationalism" 86). It is also crucial for majority
subjects to produce a critical and deconstructive knowledge about nation-
alism. As William Connolly suggests, "it is necessary to practice the arts of
experimental detachment of the self from the identity installed within it,
even though these are slippery, ambiguous arts hardly susceptible to full
realization. For it is probably impossible and surely undesirable to be
human without some sort of implication in a particular identity, yet it is
how an identity is experienced and how it defines itself with respect to
different identities that is crucial . . ." (9). In other words, it's how we get
from identity to identifying with that is crucial, from a state of being to a
process of being and of becoming, a process that includes the processes of
being citizens, of being interventionist diplomats.

My pedagogical and as civic objective is to read, study, teach, and
learn Canadian literatures as a place in which to practise the arts of
experimental detachment of the self from the identity installed within it. I am trying to practise literary studies as a space of what Simon During refers to as "the civil Imaginary," a space that facilitated a public sphere apart from the state and the nation as those structures were being conceived in the eighteenth century; that space is open again to be occupied as the public sphere of the nation-state negotiates with other public spheres in response to globalization ("Literature" 142). Indeed, global civil society cannot be negotiated without, as Gerard Delanty argues, "the internal transformation of public spheres at national and subnational levels. . . . Cosmopolitanism can succeed only if it is connected to civic communities from which it draws the strength to resist globalization" (1).

During's more recent argument for "literary subjectivity" is also not negligible at the present time ("Literary"). Literary studies organized methodologically (but not "categorically") by the name of the national can offer a space of a "political imaginary" in which to practise what Connolly calls "agonistic democracy," a practice that affirms the indispensability of identity to life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity, and folds care for the protean diversity of human life into the strife and interdependence of identity/difference [sic]" (x). In other words, and in reference to what I said above vis-à-vis the historically developed and temporally imminent sites of the national literary, we may be occupying a temporality in which national literary studies can defamiliarize both majoritized and minoritized notions and experiences of citizenship and identification: national literary studies, understood as a process, provide for a kind of literary citizenship as a form of cultural and civic participation and cultural and civic legitimation in the social imaginary. Literary studies organized under the rubric of the national create a space to ask civic questions of state policies and inherited notions of nationalism.

Pollyanna Pennee, you say, or worse, that I speak from the security—or is that insecurity—of a multiply majoritized position, which is fine for me but not for everyone. I am aware that this argument for the national literary runs exactly counter to the statement that minorities are kept out of the national canon, that a national literary canon represents an exclusionary production of majoritized, normative values. I am not denying that statement nor am I suggesting that there are no real differences of power in access to the materials for literary production and reception, nor do I think that long histories of practices of minoritization are at an end.
Rather, I am taking that statement not only as a historically accurate one, but also as a temporal one, in the sense that there is agency in changing times, in the sense that that statement—that national literary studies are exclusionary—may be operating at its historical limit. In other words, the work that everyone in this volume is engaged in is not negligible. I am also trying to work in the spirit of Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s interventions in cross-cultural feminist communities: in other words, I am not arguing for or against generalizations when I ask us to think about retaining for purposes of critical citizenship the categories of the national and the literary. Rather, I am arguing for the pertinence and timeliness of what Mohanty calls “careful, historically specific [and] complex generalizations” (349). I am also taking heart from Jürgen Habermas’s statement that “There are no laws of history in the strict sense, and human beings, even whole societies, are capable of learning” (123).

A case can be made for the continued, though differentiated, relevance of imagining community at the national level for strategic purposes. In practice, this works out (in what I attempt in my classrooms at any rate) as a pedagogy based on mobilizing different kinds of representations of Canada (from literary to literary critical to state policy to sociology, law, and newspaper coverage, for example) in order to analyze how minoritization and majoritization occur in relation to each other, in relation to a bounded political but unbounded cultural sphere, and in relation to the specificities of the literary as a form that is and is not real. Retaining the category of national literatures requires us to make that correlational move over and over again, to traffic between the material and the ideational, and to teach and to learn differentiation while also teaching and learning similarities that are not reducible to sameness. The category permits the double and doubling action of generalizing and/as particularizing, heterogenizing and/as homogenizing. In this double and doubling move, a move that Len Findlay also advocates in his essay “Always Indigenize!,” we can both continue and depart from literary studies as a form of civic education, as a form of teaching citizenship in flexible, historical, and imminent ways. But it is imperative that this pedagogy be also literary, not merely sociological, as George Elliott Clarke, among others, reminds us; it is imperative that we are acculturated by the literature and not the other way around, that the formal properties of the literature are understood to be as significant as and approached with the
same care as the issues about which writers write, or about which some of their critics insist they write.

The pressure exerted by globalization on the structures and functions of literary studies might be understood as not unlike the pressure formerly exerted on the field by structuralism and post-structuralism: these movements pressured, by interrogating and historicizing, the categories of the author, the subject, and the boundaries of literary works. As a result, a lot of people jumped to the conclusion that these categories, especially the category of the subject, had been made to disappear in ways that precluded certain kinds of interventions of historical and political importance (such as some kinds of feminisms and some kinds of postcolonialisms). Most of us have recovered from that particular and pervasive non sequitur: to paraphrase Derrida speaking about the relation of deconstruction to metaphysics (i.e., "There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics" [280]), there is no question of doing without the author, the subject, or the boundaries of literary works. It is rather a matter of doing the author, the subject, and the boundaries of literary works differently. For the time being, there is no question of doing without the national; it is rather a matter of doing the national differently. For diasporas do not come from nor do they travel through and exist in thin air, nor do citizenships. They are grounded even if not always landed. This, too, is not negligible.

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WORKS CITED


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